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CASA GRANDE

CHARLES D. STUART



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CASA GRANDE

A CALIFORNIA PASTORAL

BY

CHARLES DUFF STUART



NEW YORK

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1906

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Published September, 1906



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"LET US GO FORTH INTO THE FIELD."

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TO
MY GOOD FRIEND
W. C. MORROW

"LET ME HEAR THY VOICE."
—*Solomon's Song.*



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CASA GRANDE

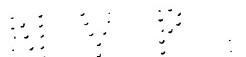
CHAPTER I

WHERE THOU FEESTH THY FLOCK

A FITFUL blaze from glowing logs moved shadows in the spacious living-room of the old house. Through the drowsy night-gloom lime-washed adobe walls showed clean and distant, their massiveness draped by vaqueros' trappings, with here and there quaint relics of former soldier occupants.

Casa Grande, sturdy and red-tiled, had been a fort when Rancho Aguas Frias, in Sonoma County, was the northernmost Mexican outpost of California. Now, some ten years later, it was the dwelling of John Miller, who had converted the abandoned outpost into a prosperous cattle range.

The master and the sheriff sat at a rough table



covered by a blanket, the map spread before them lighted by the halo-like gleam of a tallow candle.

After a short pause, Miller said, positively, "Two thousand acres are too much to give up."

"You're not exactly giving them up," contended Sam Bailey. "The squatters 'll pay you." His tone was conciliatory.

"I don't want their money; I want the land." Miller pointed to the map, and added: "See here—Aguas Frias, seventy-five hundred acres. Two thousand off leaves fifty-five hundred. That's no ranch in this county!" He moved the candle, and, still examining the map, continued: "Here's Rancho Petaluma—what does it read?—twenty thousand acres. El Coyote, eighteen thousand." He sat back and said, deliberately: "The Sotoyome, near Healdsburg, must have forty thousand. The Riata—it takes in the upper end of Napa Valley—thirty thousand. So it goes all round the bay. My land is little more than a garden-patch compared with those big grants. How can I compete as a cattle breeder?"

Both men were approaching middle age, and both were clad roughly, but with a certain frontier mo-

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dishness. They wore neither coat nor waistcoat, and strength and resolution were expressed by well-knitted figures, as well as in face and in bearing. The manhood of one was fine and developed; of the other, rough and primitive. They sat a long time in perplexed study of the problem confronting them.

"I'd rather have the land," said Miller, pushing aside the map. "I'd rather have the land than twice what they'll pay for it. What will they give?"

Bailey moved uneasily. "I don't know. The Government price is a dollar and a quarter an acre."

"Oh, yes. A dollar and a quarter. Think I'm the Government? The land cost me twice that!"

Bailey looked up questioningly. He said he had heard that the grant of seven thousand five hundred acres cost ten thousand dollars.

Miller smiled indulgently. "That's what I paid for it; just half the cost. Add lawyers' fees, court fees, surveying—wait till you perfect title to a Mexican grant. You'll see where the money goes!"

"That's all right," Bailey declared, waving aside further objections. "You'll get your price, whatever it is."

"No," said Miller, rising and pacing the floor; "I'll take no chances. I'll not sell."

The sheriff leaned against the table and sighed. "You're very positive," he said, at last, "but I know the squatters, their tempers, their opinions; you don't. I'd like to help them and keep you out of trouble."

"Aren't you borrowing trouble on my account, Sam?"

"Every one lends trouble to the sheriff; he's like a policeman, you know." Bailey smiled rather dismally. "But when a fellow has had to preserve the peace and dignity of the county through three or four of these squatter wars—well, he has seen the seamy side of that kind of fighting."

Miller said that the sheriff was still harping on the row he got into last year—the time the squatters came near running old Caldwell off the Sotoyome grant.

Bailey went over to the fireplace, where the dogs, lean and enduring, stretched indolently about the comfortable hearth—three or four foxhounds and as many mongrels, in which the blood of foxhound

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and shepherd predominated. They half-sleepily, half-sulkily made room for him, as if they had earned the right to undisturbed possession of the fire by the countless miles travelled daily in following the vaqueros, or chasing the wild things that defied their vigilance—coyotes, foxes, wildcats, 'coons, skunks and squirrels. The intruder regarded the sprawling pack with amusement, and then said to Miller:

"Suppose I am harping on the Sotoyome. You can't fight the way Caldwell does! That old terrier has killed three of his squatters, been twice shot by them, burned out, I don't know how many times, and who knows how many of his cattle have been killed or stolen?"

The dogs moved uneasily; the guest was talking very loud.

"I'd feel proud of you, John," banteringly continued the speaker, "if you start to raise hell, the way old Caldwell has been doing." He laughed quietly at his silent host.

"The squatters 'll raise hell if I don't," retorted Miller. "I've been two years their neighbor," he

continued, ignoring Bailey's mute protest. "I know something of their ways."

Bailey asked why the enemy couldn't be fenced off, now that the boundaries had been fixed.

"I might wall them off," admitted the master of Casa Grande, derisively. "They've thrown down my fences to suit themselves."

Bailey watched the rancher, still pacing the floor in the same perplexity, sure that his host's good impulses would prevail. "They'll make you mad many times—I know that. But better have patience than fight. You wouldn't leave—sell out?"

"No," decidedly answered Miller. "This place suits me better than anything I have seen. Here I stay. I say that I'll have to fight, anyway, whether I sell them the land they claim, or whether I put them off."

"How did you get in such a mess?" asked Bailey, going back to the table.

Miller joined his guest, and leaned over the map as if seeking the reason in the diagram. "It was a case of poor lawyer, to begin with. Then there was too much wealth against me. The Calabezas

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people here"—he pointed to the tract of land on the map; lying to the west of Aguas Frias—"wanted the water in the Calabezas Creek, so their lines were fixed by the Commissioners of the Land Office far enough east to take in what the owners wanted. That forced my east line across Dry Creek. We both are Mexican grants, but they got their claim confirmed before we got ours." He dejectedly stared through the uncurtained western windows, where stars twinkled indifferently.

"You own a good ranch, even as it is," said Bailey, approvingly. "And, what's better, you're going to give the squatters a show to buy title to their claims." He laid a hand on Miller's shoulder, in passing, and went over to where Manuel, the old Mexican cook, trim and soldierly, was mixing bread.

Miller regarded his guest with a shade of resentment, and called to him to know why he was interested in this land controversy, anyway.

Bailey answered the question confidently. These were his people. He had grown up among them. And he liked Miller, too, whom he wanted to keep out of trouble.

"Thank you, Bailey," responded the host. "I appreciate your intentions, but from now on you and the court must take care of the squatters."

"I can only do my duty," said the sheriff, with a note of disappointment. "They'll know that you are making the fight, however; won't they, Manuel?"

The cook looked up quizzically. Lines that scarred the grizzled countenance were softened and the sensitive play of thin lips partly obscured by the light of a candle beside him. "Meestah Jone dam' good fighter," he answered.

"But not this kind of a fight," protested Bailey.

"You theenk es-squatter fellah like Indian? es-shoot in back?"

"Of course! You and I know that; but Miller—he's a newcomer, eh?"

The old man stood meditating, while he wiped the flour from his hands and bare arms. "Me theenk es-sell land, Meestah Jone. Es-squatter fight like coyote. All time es-stand behind rock, behind tree. Burn grass, burn es-stable; keel cattle."

"Yes, yes," Miller impatiently exclaimed. "I've

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heard this before. What's the good of courts, of sheriffs, if we must take the law into our own hands?"

"You fight reech man with lawyer," was the sage reply. "You fight es-squatter with rifle. Es-sheriff no can find heem. Es-squatter like Indian. Long time ago me fight Indian, pero me Indian then. Me walk like Indian, eat like Indian, sleep like Indian, keel like heem. You no es-squatter, Meestah Jone."

"No," said Miller, stubbornly, "I'll not sell. If they are your people," he continued, addressing Bailey, "do a little missionary work. Teach them that times have changed. There are courts and prisons now."

Bailey laughed noisily. "Missionary work! The Bible always has followed the trail of the rifle, Miller. If you stick to your purpose, my missionary work 'll be grave-digging."

"Cheer up, old man," said Miller, lightly. "You've pleaded gallantly for your people. You'd make a good lawyer." The speaker keenly studied his guest. "Which one of these families are you most interested in?" he abruptly asked, still convinced that

Bailey had some ulterior motive in championing the cause of the squatters.

"All of them," was the indifferent reply.

The host had struck the trail of a fresh suggestion, and proposed to follow it. His eyes twinkled as he continued: "Perhaps it's that family with six lanky sons. Looking for votes?"

"Yes," cheerily answered the sheriff. "I have my eyes on them. Seven votes in one family, you know." His tone was still indifferent.

Miller rose from the table and backed up to the fireplace. He had found his clue at last, and he wondered that it had not sooner occurred to him.

"Is it the widow, or the girl?" He asked the question politely, to avoid any suspicion of impertinence.

"I don't know what you're driving at," replied Bailey, awkwardly.

Miller and Manuel laughed, making a pleased, indulgent sound urging Bailey to further protestations. "If you refer to the Clarks," he said, "I know them and like them. All the squatters are my friends."

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Miller was considering how much farther he could interrogate his guest. He felt a curiosity to know more of this squatter family, who appeared superior to their neighbours. He was sure Bailey would reply lightly if he felt lightly, so the guest was reminded that he had not yet answered whether it were the mother or the daughter.

Bailey had been watching Manuel shaping dough into loaves ready for the baking-pan. He straightened up with a gesture of irritation, and exclaimed: "You don't credit me with much taste!"

"Excuse me," said Miller. "I've never seen the widow."

"She's a good woman," Bailey explained. "A little sad, perhaps. You've seen the girl?"

Miller responded with a drawl that he had seen her, emphasising "seen."

Bailey regarded his host critically, and asked, with some warmth, if there were anything against Belle.

"On the contrary," affably replied Miller, "it's against me. She never has spoken to me—not even to answer my good-mornings."

"She's a girl in a hundred," declared Bailey, en-

thusiastically. "She can ride, she can shoot, she can cook. Have you noticed how she dresses? Does it herself. And the house, chickens, flowers—all hers." He waved his arm with a sweeping gesture.

"Yeh," chimed in Manuel. "La señorita ees—ees—muy bonita."

"You still preserve a youthful eye," placidly observed Miller, addressing the cook, who was laying covers, ready for early breakfast, on a long redwood table, polished and darkened by much scrubbing, benches of the same material on either side of it.

"Yeh," admitted the cook, in pleased simplicity. "He es-say, 'Manuel, give me Castilian rose; me plant 'em.' "

Miller at once wanted to know where she had made the request.

"Ober een garden," Manuel replied, indicating the direction with a jerk of his head.

"You old sinner!" exclaimed Miller. "She invades my domain through the kitchen, does she, as if I never existed? I like that!" He slapped his knees in enjoyment and laughed.

Bailey spoke up resentfully and denied that she was a sneak.

"Beg pardon, old man," said Miller, quickly. "I didn't intend to convey that idea."

"She's as true as steel," explained her champion, anxious to justify the girl. "She's got pluck and sand. Afraid of nothing. A friend through thick and thin!"

"I understand," said Miller, genially, nodding his head. "A girl who can love truly."

"She might be," sighed Bailey. "I haven't got so far. It isn't my fault." He was still a child, clamouring for sympathy.

"Come," said Miller, walking to the table, "tell me about them. Who and what are they?"

Bailey followed his host, and moved awkwardly, but not reluctantly. "They came in here," he explained, tilting back his chair, "about eight years ago. Their father was alive then—old Pat Clark."

"Irish?" asked Miller.

"Not necessarily," replied Bailey. "His name was Patrick Henry—born in the South, somewhere. Pat was a rustler—red-headed, lean, quick as a wildcat."

He didn't know what fear meant. He was trim-built; used to dress like a trapper—always well-dressed. Belle takes after him." The sheriff paused. His fancy was calling to life the girl in her half-Indian costume.

"I believe it was Diana who used to hunt," remarked Miller, absently, thinking of the same characteristic in her dress.

Bailey stared with an uncomprehending glance, and went on: "The old man built the house and got things well started—fences, tools, stock, orchard. We found him, one morning, beside a grizzly, both dead—his favourite saddle-mare and foal near by, the mare badly torn. The bear must have been trying to get away with the foal, and Pat, with no weapon but a knife, had attacked the robber. Christ!" he concluded, "what a savage fight!"

Miller asked how long ago it happened.

"My second year as deputy sheriff," answered Bailey, meditatively. "That was 1855—three years ago. Belle was sixteen. She's fathered the family ever since."

"He es-speak Spanish—little," remarked Manuel,

ignoring the gender of his personal pronouns. The old fellow was laying a fire in the highly polished new stove, ready for morning.

"You hold converse with her, do you?" blandly asked Miller.

"Yeh," vaguely answered Manuel. "Hold horse es-sometime."

Miller solemnly looked at Bailey. The sheriff detected mischief deep in those eyes. Not a muscle of the host's face twitched under the crisp, reddish beard as he remarked that he trusted his guest would have no feeling about Manuel's attentions.

Bailey was not quite sure whether or not the master of Casa Grande were making fun of him. He looked steadily into the other man's face and answered evenly: "If I were as sure of you as I am of Manuel—"

"Me!" It was too much for Miller's gravity, and he laughed. "You should see her look at me, Sam, when we meet. Insolent—that's the only word I know for it."

"That's it," reluctantly admitted Bailey. "She does care, and takes that way of hiding it. You

must think a great deal of a person before you can hate him."

It was sound philosophy, and Miller wondered if his guest had judged the girl without prejudice. Was it because the master of Casa Grande was young and prosperous that she acted as she did?

"I'll tell you, Sam," said Miller, rising at last and laying a friendly hand on his guest's shoulder, "for two dollars an acre I'll sell the squatters any land claimed by them within my boundaries. I'll ride to Dry Creek the first day I can make time and propose it."

"If they kick and snort," said Bailey, anxiously, "don't get mad. Let me see them first."

"I'll not get mad, Bailey," said Miller, going to the fireplace and taking down a box of smoking tobacco. "It's a matter of indifference whether or not they buy. They're going to fight, either way. Have a smoke."

Bailey rolled a cigarette and lighted it. Manuel joined them, turning down his sleeves over spare, yellow arms in token that his day's work was finished. Neat and methodical himself, the house was

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an expression of his character. The orderliness of the place was hardly feminine, although there was a deep vein of femininity in the Mexican's make-up; it was, rather, military, systematic, the habit of early training.

"Don't fight, Miller," protested Bailey, throwing away his light. "You hold human life—the meanest of it—too sacred. You couldn't kill a white man and a neighbour!"

The three men, smoking gravely, soon had a little blue cloud hanging over the table. Manuel took his cigarette from his lips and thoughtfully blew the smoke through his nostrils. "Me theenk," he said, "we fight."

"Go on!" replied Bailey, banteringly. "You're getting old and bilious."

"Why do you think so, Manuel?" kindly asked Miller.

"Es-squatter fellahs like Indians. Neber leave hunting-grounds." The old soldier's mind kept harking back to the days of his youthful experiences, no race quite equalling the Indian for comparison with squatters, both being primitive.

Miller threw away his cigarette, rolled up the map and asked Manuel to fetch Mr. Bailey's candle.

"No, no," protested the guest, jumping from his seat. "I must go home."

"In the morning," hospitably replied the host. "Your horse has been stabled these two hours."

CHAPTER II

BEHOLD, HE COMETH

MILLER kept his promise to the sheriff, and within a week of their meeting at Casa Grande the owner rode over to the squatter settlement, about three miles to the northeast.

The ranchero was mounted on a lithe bay mare, which swiftly climbed the lazy rises of intervening hills dotted thick with oak, buckeye and madroño, and at the top he wound down a rough grade, little better than a trail, leading to Dry Creek. This name had been given to a wooded vale of about a thousand acres swung, hammock-like, high in the hills that separated Napa Valley on the east from Sonoma Valley on the west. The waterway suggesting the name, dry most of the year, ran through the length of the little garden-spot, and now was flowing noisily, filled by late showers.

Around the point of a knoll the little valley came fully in sight. Scattered along the creek, in the shade of great trees, were half a dozen cabins, homes of the settlers whose claims unfortunately had proved to be within the eastern boundary of the grant. Grapevine and fruit trees, patches of young grain and bands of grazing cattle gave an air of prosperity, and from wide-throated chimneys smoke-columns suggested the fireside.

The rider stopped abruptly as the view opened before him. The mare, feeling the pressure of the bit, tossed her head and laid back her ears irritably. Her temper, as well as her conformation, told of thoroughbred descent, and the man's costume and firm, easy seat bespoke him a horseman born and bred.

While he paused to contemplate, a girl stepped from the nearest cabin and stood on the porch. Her glance swept the hills as if she loved them, and when her gaze rested on the horseman she shaded her eyes with her palm, then descended to the door-yard. If she divined who the man was, nothing in her demeanour betrayed her knowledge. She walked with a

graceful swing telling of strength and resolution, and passed through a gate into another yard, where clamorous fowls, pigs, calves and dogs, crowding fearlessly about her, told of something sweet and feminine.

Miller concluded to bargain with the Clarks first. They held a leading place among the neighbours, who would be influenced, if not decided, by the acts of the widow and her daughter, and he guided Peggy in the direction of the girl. At the foot of the grade the road crossed the little stream. Peggy hesitated daintily on the margin of the water, but the pressure of her rider's knees urged her in, and she waded across, splashing diamond drops high in the air. Turning to the right, they skirted a zigzag fence of redwood rails, the entrance, at the side of the Clark house, closed by a single bar. Miller was about to dismount, but Peggy, waiving the formality of letting down the rail, lightly cleared it, and stopped before the porch.

The girl, while the horseman was approaching, lingered among her farm-yard dependents until he rode near enough to greet her politely. She turned

resentful eyes to his, but the sunshine, the humour, to say nothing of the admiration she beheld, drove the chill from her manner; her head dropped in confusion, and she disappeared behind the cabin.

Something homelike and tidy about the dwelling made it noticeable among its fellows in the glen. Rough and primitive it had to be, but there also were proportion and solidity, suggesting artistic sense in the builder. A crimson rose-bush aflame with bloom climbed over the north end and almost hid the massive chimney laid up outside the wall, and a grapevine, unfolding its new leaves to the sunshine, like long-chilled hands when warmed, was trained across the porch. Between porch and road a garden blossomed, kept fresh the year round by water piped from a spring. The woodwork was bare of paint, but over all the sun had spread a mellow colouring suggestive of fine old wine.

The girl's mother emerged and waited on the porch. She was lean and muscular, with an expression not unkindly, yet uncertain of her position in life, the responsibilities of the family having long

ago been assumed by Belle. Her apron and her bare arms were powdered with flour, but otherwise her dress was neat. The odour of frying pork warned the man of the nearness to noon.

"Good morning," was the widow's abrupt greeting.

Miller asked if she were Mrs. Clark.

The woman assented by silence, and her caller knew sufficient of his neighbours to state his business at once.

"I came over," he began, hesitating, "to see if I can trade for your improvements."

"My old man was always ready to trade anything except the children and me, and I'm like him."

"There must be Scotch or Irish about you," observed Miller, feeling that the ice had been broken.

"Yes," she answered, curtly; "both."

"But you are American born," he suggested, with rising inflection. "I take you to be a native of Missouri or Kentucky?"

"No—Tennessee."

"Somewhere from the South," he hopefully continued. "I belong there, too; I was born in Virginia,

although my father was a Scotchman. I think we can trade."

Mrs. Clark approached the porch rail and, embracing one of the posts, stood oppressively silent. Her heredity had taught her to keep advantage in a bargain by having the other person make the offers. While they stood thus, Belle, having left her chickens, joined her mother, as silent as the older woman. The man lost no phase of the picture, and the humour of it glowed in his eyes. Even Peggy began to feel the hostility of the surroundings and moved uneasily.

"What will you take?" he ventured, making the final plunge.

"Five thousand dollars," was the quick reply. It was evident that the matter of sale and values had been considered by at least this family.

"I didn't mean the land," he soothingly explained. "Just the improvements—stock, tools and furniture, if you choose."

"Five thousand dollars, I said," came the emphatic rejoinder, notwithstanding the tone of his last speech.

"Now we begin to understand each other," he affably continued. "Of course, you want all you can get, but that will largely depend on what I can pay."

"I don't care what you can pay. You asked what I'd take. You know now, don't ye?"

"I know what you ask. But now that you must give up this land—move off——"

"We're not going to give up this land," interrupted the widow, "so there's no use talking. We might sell, if we could get a fair price. You nor nobody else 'll put us off—not so long as we can shoot." She changed the arm encircling the post.

"I bought and paid for this land," he said, ignoring the threat.

"I don't know what you've bought, nor what you've stolen, nor what you'd like to steal. This is my place. We've lived here eight years—more than the law requires to get title." She stepped back and leaned against the house, as if she had finished.

Her caller was persistent. He rode nearer and asked why they didn't get title.

"Wait till they settle that Aguas Frias grant," she answered.

"You saw the surveyors," he insisted, "running the lines of the Aguas Frias on the other side of this valley—those lines take in your land."

"Yes; we saw men driving stakes over there. I pulled 'em up. No surveyors can survey us out of here!"

He suggested that they buy his title.

She contemptuously answered that she wouldn't buy what was already hers.

"My dear woman," he continued, in great perplexity, "can't you understand that the Government never intended this land for settlement until after the grant lines had been established? You're a squatter—always have been—never had any right here, never could nor can get title. I——"

"Why didn't some one find that out before?" she interrupted. "We've been here long enough!"

He saw what a useless mission he had undertaken; he would make a last offer, and go. "I'm simply repeating the decision made by the court a few weeks since," he said, quietly, in conclusion. "I don't propose to take any advantage of you, but this is my land. I'll buy your improvements and anything you

don't want to take away, rather than make further trouble; or I'll sell the land at two dollars an acre."

The girl stepped resolutely to the front of the porch, and the caller saw that his errand was not yet ended. "See here, Mr. Miller," she indignantly exclaimed, "maw's had her say; I'll have mine. Even if maw's willing to sell, we ain't. We—the boys and me—have something to say. We've worked and grubbed and saved on this place till we've as much interest as any one, and we won't sell; neither will we buy—it's ours!"

"That's for you to decide," he answered, indifferently.

"We don't want to sell, and you can't put us off!"

"Oh, come now, Miss Clark——"

"My name's Belle," she interrupted; "it's good enough for me!"

"I beg your pardon, Belle." He looked kindly at her. "I didn't come to discuss what I can do, nor what you can do. I want to pay you for your improvements, or I want pay for my land. When I must put you off, I shall apply to the court for a writ of ejectment and let the sheriff execute it."

"We'll defy the court, and the sheriff, too," she wrathfully answered. "We'll band together, and then see what kind of a fight we'll make. The sheriff won't bother a handful of settlers 'way out here in Dry Creek. Not much. Nobody round here's going to fight us; we're all in the same fix!"

"I didn't know that women could be so childish, so unreasonable," exclaimed Miller, in disgust. He dismounted, readjusted the saddle-blanket and took Peggy by the bit. She had grown restless and would no longer stand to his command.

"We're not unreasonable," defiantly answered Belle. "It's our home, and we want it. We've dragged around from one place to another till we're sick of moving."

"Why did you move here, anyway?" he impatiently demanded.

"It was the only place we could find," she answered, rather more gently than she had yet spoken. "We've lived in Missouri, in Kentucky, in Tennessee, in Utah, and now here. We crossed the plains in '50, starting from Southern Utah. When we reached Los Angeles everything had been sold to

take us through. We lived six months in 'Frisco, and when we had saved enough to buy an outfit we started to find land." She threw back a heavy braid of wavy hair and pressed her hand to her forehead.

"We crossed over to Oakland," she continued, "and drove up the bay-shore to Benicia; all the way it was Spanish grants—no Government land—everything held in the name of grants by rich land-grabbers. I believe now that not half were grants—just lies to keep poor people like us off the land and turn it over to cattle and horses." Indignation made her pause again.

"It was the same this side the bay. All the good land was grant. Grant, grant, morning, noon and night. Do you wonder that we are sick of the name?"

The ranchero looked up in surprise. She was growing confidential—asking his opinion. Only nineteen! Her mind was mature for her years, but her pearly complexion under its hue of tan, the scarlet lips and clear, hazel eyes, bespoke youth—vivid, glowing youth.

"We heard of this little valley at last, out here be-

yond the reach of grants." She spoke absently, the memory of their trip still vivid. "It was in May when we came. After the sand and mud of 'Frisco, Dry Creek was a garden. We all said, 'Here's the place for a home,' and here we settled. We've worked and fought and saved to make it what it is. Our dead father—" Her voice failed, and she mutely pointed to a little picket-fenced enclosure, the green of sweetbriars massed in it pink with blossoms. She looked shamefaced that, in her excitement, he had caught her yielding to an emotion for her dead, and went on evenly again: "Now you come and claim this for your land. I say you're a liar, you're a thief—just like those other land-grabbers, from Oakland to Cloverdale."

The girl had made an eloquent plea for possession; not by voice alone, but by lips, eyes, by her youth, by every curve of a figure moulded in unrestrained activity. It was not enough that hands and arms had emphasised her speech, but all the yielding lines from throat to foot had rippled in the swing of earnestness. If her coarse, almost masculine garments failed to hide feminine graces, what symmetry

might not a modish gown on her reveal, what personal charms might not a more conventional garb disclose?

The man's resolution weakened before the charm of intense, unconscious womanliness. Emotion, when aroused, does not reason, and that was what he was facing. To an undeveloped nature like Belle's what difference is right or wrong when feeling stirs? Here were their home, their fireside, the resting-place of their dead, all worth dying for. The pity of it was that the administration of public lands had been lax and incompetent. His reflections suggested one more question.

"Did your father ever ask a lawyer about the right to locate here?"

"Yes," answered the girl, eager to vindicate their possession. "Judge Aiken told him this land was outside the grant boundaries open to settlers."

"And," added her mother, anxious that nothing should be forgotten, "he went to the Land Office in 'Frisco, and they told him the land was outside the grant, and Government land."

"Did he file a claim on it, then?" asked Miller, a new interest in his tones.

"No," reluctantly answered the girl. "He wanted to, but they told him they couldn't take his money till the Aguas Frias had been—something," she vaguely concluded.

"Been confirmed?" suggested her questioner.

"Yes. Till the ranch had been confirmed.

The ranchero's anticipations fell again. These people had had premonitions of a conflict when the time came to perfect title to their claims. The probabilities had evidently been intelligently discussed. He still felt justified in his determination to recover his rights, but not quite so resolute in enforcing them. He need but look about him to see what this home-building had been to the family, and especially to the girl, whose feminine touches showed everywhere. The house, partly shaded by spreading oaks; the garden; the old hound, stiff and rheumatic, lolling in the sun; the flock of noisy, scratching fowls—told of home love and contentment, appealing forcibly to like sentiments in the man's nature.

Even if Miller's mission had been thus far ineffect-

factual, his call on these neighbours had at least promoted a better understanding. He knew more of the motives at the base of the girl's antagonism to his coming on the range; and she, too, now realised that the new master of Aguas Frias had some justification for claiming the land in Dry Creek. She began to appreciate that, after all, he was human, and something in his blue eyes—was it admiration of her?—gave a new interest to his face.

The young people were indulging in somewhat personal reveries, when Tom, the older of the two sons, and younger than Belle, rode into the yard. Across the withers of his horse was a dead stag, a rifle lying on the deer's body. He came nearer to the group and sat looking questioningly at Miller. Belle stepped from the porch and told her brother that Mr. Miller had come to put them off the land.

The hazel eyes of the slim, wiry youth of seventeen flashed, and his sallow skin grew darker. Lifting his rifle with shaking fingers, he swung toward the caller, and suddenly asked him if he were armed.

Miller stepped quite close to his challenger and

confronted him with a costume devoid of the slightest trace of warfare.

"I'll shoot you like a skunk," said the boy, "if you come here again. I'd do it now, only I ain't shooting unarmed men."

The unarmed man smiled good-naturedly. His manner was neither reckless nor indifferent, but quietly alert, as if he knew his danger and was prepared to meet it. He still held Peggy by the bit, and the mare sniffed suspiciously at Tom's mount and the dead deer, and laid back her ears protestingly. Her master placed his free hand quietly on the other horse's neck and, looking Tom in the eye, slowly said:

"Do you think that shooting will settle this matter, my boy? My title is a public record, and it can be changed only with my consent or a decree of court. One court has already decreed that this land is mine, and I want it. I'm willing to pay for your improvements and your stock and your implements, but I want the land, or I want pay for it."

"Where did you get this land?" asked Tom, with rising voice. "You stole it. You're a thief, a grab-

ber, and you think you can come here and scare us off. You can't! There's somebody besides women in this family. Try to put us off, and see. I'll shoot the first man that sets foot here, whether it'll settle anything or not!"

"What's the matter with you all?" asked a drawling voice. Wash, the youngest of the family, had slouched up unnoticed, and stood behind them, his rifle over his shoulder, a pair of jack-rabbits in hand. He was fourteen, stoop-shouldered, even-tempered, and as slow of speech as the others were quick.

His sister regarded him with irritation, caused, apparently, by his easy curiosity when the others were boiling with resentment. "Matter enough," she assured the youngster. "Miller wants to put us off our land—claims it's his."

"Will he give us anything to move?" shrewdly asked the newcomer.

"For the improvements," answered Belle.

"Going to take it?"

"We're going to fight. We'll never get off alive!"

"You hear me," drawled the boy, "and sell. No use fighting."

"No use anything, if we were all like you, Wash Clark." The girl's eyes snapped and her cheeks showed deep colouring. She walked back to the porch, and turned at the stone step. "You're a coward. You wouldn't fight a jack-rabbit unless you had a gun."

"Yes," replied the boy, with placid unconcern, "I'll fight if there's anything to gain. I'll not fight windmills, though."

"Windmills!" exclaimed Belle. Words failed her for the moment.

The man who was an unwilling observer of this attempt at family discipline relaxed the tension of the last minute or two. The old humourous light again played in his eyes, and he wondered what the boy knew about Don Quixote. The girl evidently was not equal to Wash's slow emotions, nor his droll fancy. The prospect of a tragedy was rapidly becoming farcical.

"Who's fighting windmills?" asked Belle, at last.

"The fellow that fights Government lines," said her brother. "I've been thinking about him ever

since the surveyors put the stakes over there. The land must be his."

"That was the decision of court the other day," explained Miller. "You heard it."

"Why," asked the boy, addressing Miller, "did you get this land? I thought you bought the valleys of the Aguas Frias and the Calabezas." He was facing the man, his rough, tanned hands resting on the muzzle of his gun, its butt on the ground. There was an expression on his face of wise curiosity.

The owner of Aguas Frias was pleased to have an opportunity to explain how the eastern boundary of his ranch became involved, and he briefly told the boy why he had been obliged to accept Dry Creek Valley in lieu of the more desirable Calabezas lands.

"It's all a lie," said Belle, joining the group. "You wanted this land for your stock, and if the Government has put it inside your lines, it's because you've bought us out. But you'll never live to call it yours. When we move off, you'll never move on!"

The girl was getting beside herself; so was Peggy. The mare lunged on the bit, tried to rear out of her master's grasp, and ran from the discord evident in

tone, if not in word. The man, too, was ready to go, and was steadying himself for a leap to the saddle, when Tom again called to him:

"Get out of here quick, John Miller, before I put a ball through you." The boy's voice was pitched high, and he waved the rifle threateningly.

As soon as Peggy felt Miller's weight in the saddle she darted for the opening in the fence. He brought her back to the angry group and turned to Belle as the virtual head of the family. In his glance was a fire she had never seen, and instinctively she drew back. She knew that he had reached the end of his patience and that his will was masterful.

"I didn't come to make trouble," he said, gently. "I'll leave. Don't work yourselves into unnecessary passion. I've been fair and neighbourly. Now I'll turn you over to the sheriff. Shoot him."

The caller swayed in his seat, and that gave the mare her cue. She bounded for the bars and cleared them with a leap. When on the trail she increased her speed, crossing the brook in two strides, and stretched away up the hillside in the direction from which they had come a little while before.

The widow, watching the horse and rider disappear up the trail, remarked that he leaped their fences as if they already had no right there.

"I want to hear a fop like him talk about turning us over to the sheriff," scornfully observed Tom, throwing the stag on the ground and dismounting. "Look at the bit of pigskin he calls a saddle! Look at the pipe-stem legs of his mare! I've a notion to follow him and show him how to ride."

"Don't," said Belle, drily, walking up to the deer. Her brother sharply faced her, and wanted to know why not.

"You saw him clear the bars? You saw him cross the brook?" The girl nodded wisely. "The horse that can follow him don't happen to be on this range—to-day—nor in the country."

CHAPTER III

MY SOUL HAD FAILED ME

BAILY closely followed Miller's fruitless expedition to Dry Creek. Before the master of Casa Grande made his final cast the sheriff had been given an opportunity to see the squatters, and his interview failed in its purpose quite as dismally as the one first attempted by the ranchero. The friend of the settlers, the man who knew them well, who had grown up among them, cheerfully set out this morning on his self-appointed mission. He now was riding from defeat toward Casa Grande, stoop-shouldered and depressed.

Along the grassy trail the horse stepped alertly to the jangle of little bells on heavy roweled spurs. The soil was warm with the fever of reproduction, and through the heavens fleecy clouds strayed lazily, now and then crossing the sun. The god of day

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was in his holy temple, and the earth gave prodigally both praise and perfume. The joy of it all, however, did not gladden the approaching rider, for duty, grim and resolute, threatened his undoing.

The Clarks had refused, with childlike consistency, either to buy Miller's title or sell their improvements. Others of the squatters proved quite as unreasonable. Both propositions had been discussed by the colony, and the decision reached was unanimous. The next move would require force, armed force, and perhaps bloodshed. What, then, would become of the sheriff's day dreams?

Bailey's plan of life, on its domestic side, included Belle. He never had consulted her, except in fancy, when through lonely watches her spirit waited with his. He was not imaginative, and he had not deemed it necessary to make a confidante of the girl. She long ago must have seen that he favoured her, and that was sufficient. His purpose had seemed natural and reasonable until to-day, when a woman's whim unseated him. Through the gray dawn of his courtship he had been herding phantoms, soft figures moving as if alive; but in the light of sudden defeat

those uncertain forms had taken shape—bleak rocks and gnarled stumps beside a lonely and unfamiliar trail, rotting logs on the uplands, and clumps of brush in the gullies.

To get back again into the dawning; to feel that his plan of life would develop as he had dreamed of it! He never had thought of putting her love to the test; there had been no need for it. But this morning the test unconsciously had been thrust upon her, and it shocked him to discover how small a place he filled in her regard. He had taken too much for granted, and he harshly condemned the serenity of his assumption that all he need do was ask and she would yield the utmost he required of her.

He realised, at last, that she must be won, and his first impulse was to temporise with duty. If he ejected the squatters, he would forfeit her friendship, and that of her family; it was inevitable, and a way must be found to avoid the issue for the time. Always before he had done his duty unfalteringly; it had been simply a matter of dollars and cents and the demands of office. Now he felt in his obligation the sting of personal interest, and he wavered under

an appalling prospect of loss, unable to realise that he never could hold a woman's esteem unless he preserved self-respect.

The horseman roused from his moody reverie when he saw just below him, farther down the slope, the red-tiled roof of Casa Grande. Among clustering oaks and madroños, the house, a hollow square, stood rugged and unpretentious, typical of the man who had chosen it as his dwelling-place. There was an air about it of comfort and prosperity, stirring in the sheriff a quite unreasonable feeling of resentment. Yet some one must bear the blame of his still-smarting discomfiture, and was it not on Miller' account that he had sallied forth this morning?

Bailey's train of thought changed and his irritation deepened. Everything turned for the ranchero's advancement. The road he travelled was wide and smooth, while other men must dig and hew and blast. The sheriff would not be another instrument insuring progress for him to whom success was easy. The officer of the court, in dispossessing the squatters, would see the law executed with justice to all;

his oath required that; petty quarrels of neighbours must be adjusted without his aid.

The rider moved petulantly in his saddle, and his mount instinctively broke to a canter, to be suddenly pulled up to a walk again. As they came nearer the dwelling Bailey could see a bell on the old watch-tower rising from the centre of the hollow square. While he gazed, a rope tightened, and the bell turned over, clanging the noon hour. Many years that sound had echoed martially in the wooded foothills, and to what purpose? Now it summoned tired and hungry men to rest and refreshment, waking, for the first time, a sense of homeliness. Even the saddle-horses had learned the meaning of it, and whinnied responsively.

Bailey did not care to eat; the tolling melody from the tower did not stir his appetite, but it brought to his imagination the old cook, who, day after day, faithfully rang the summons. A lesson was in that solitary character. However much the man that was hesitating might despise the Mexican race and all spirits kindred to it, he realised with almost savage resentment that in Manuel, who now served

cheerfully, although he once had been served, there was no faltering in duty.

As the visitor came nearer, the sound of hoofs on the road leading to the stable told the inmates of Casa Grande that a stranger was approaching. The range horses were barefooted; their tread on the well-worn thoroughfare fell muffled and shuffling, easily distinguished from the solid ring of shod hoofs. Gyp, the tawny collie, and Manuel appeared at the open front door, the dog to bark her welcome and leap to the muzzle of the sheriff's horse, the man to wave greeting.

In the stable Miller was filling mangers. He looked smilingly at the visitor and continued his task, pitching hay with the ease of a trained labourer. Bailey watched furtively, and wondered at the pleasure his host took in menial tasks he could well afford to hire the doing of. The motive must be more compelling than sordidness, for Miller's disposition was generous. The caller's sluggish perception caught at the idea of duty, a vague suggestion as yet, but one that grew steadily in his mind. He turned alertly at last, took his welcome as a matter of

course, as the host had done, stripped saddle and bridle from his mount, and tied the animal in a stall. Primitive souls need few words to determine the quality of hospitality.

'As the two friends stepped from the building, the vaqueros galloped up, shouting and cutting boyish capers. They had earned an hour's rest, and they took it strenuously, as they took work. Close at their heels were the dogs, almost human in their understanding of the riders' moods and purposes. To the clamour of the men was added the yelping of the pack, never too weary to respond to the humour of their adored masters. While never too weary to respond, they sometimes were too footsore, and then they must be tied up until bleeding soles could be renewed again. Even they had duties to perform, in spite of bodily discomfort, and to their credit it was that Aguas Frias was kept quite free from four-footed prowlers.

Miller carried a forkful of hay which he put in Peggy's box-stall, opening to the courtyard. The mare's head was out of the open upper half of her door, and she whinnied and laid back her ears, giving

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to her intelligent countenance an aspect of harmless viciousness entirely ignored by her master. After he had petted her and smoothed her glossy neck, she must lower her velvety muzzle to the caresses of the collie, which often came to visit the comfortable prisoner.

By the side of Peggy's box was the deserted stall of Mad Anthony Wayne, the monarch of the cow herd. The old fellow was not idle these days, for his domain was wide and his cares many. He was a courageous fighter, bulk and strength making him formidable. Never yet had invading hoof or claw, after giving battle to the bull, emerged alive from conflict. He was the pride of every man of them, an unconscious hero placing duty above even life itself.

Wherever the sheriff turned, a lesson of duty challenged him. Like the wave to a sturdy swimmer, it was plunged into and buffeted here with resolute strokes. No holding back nor complaining, but each allotment was cheerfully undertaken and carried to the end, thus adding to the comfort and prosperity characteristic of Aguas Frias.

Seven men surrounded the dining-table in the

centre of the big living-room and dropped into places, with a cover or two to spare, and from the heaping platter of stew a savoury vapour rose appetizingly. The vaqueros took their meals seriously, as they did all things that came to them, without discussion, and refused to linger over even their pleasures.

Behind the company, in silent expectancy, ranged the dogs, enviously watching every motion of knife and fork—their dinner, a feast or a famine, depending on what remained. There was little promise of many basketfuls, but they stealthily eyed the cook now and then, as if with faith in his ability to add to the fragments. When the meal was eaten, the inevitable box of tobacco appeared, and cigarettes were rolled and lighted.

Bailey and the master lingered after the others, who withdrew to the sunshine of the courtyard and gossipped of the morning's work. Miller knew from the preoccupied manner of the sheriff that the skein of his duties had snarled, and the host waited to be asked for help in disentangling the thread. The man who met life resolutely could not know, how-

ever, that his wavering brother had caught the spirit of Casa Grande and that duty radiantly beckoned him once again.

"I'd like to club those Ethiopian asses!" was the sheriff's abrupt beginning.

"Any one in particular?" blandly asked Miller, flicking the ash from his cigarette.

"The squatters," was the irritable answer. "They've talked it over and propose to stand together."

Miller's face lighted with a quiet smile. "If I remember correctly," he drawled, "you advised patience in my case."

"Yes, I know." The bushy eyebrows of the sheriff met in a scowl. "Rub it in! Tramp on me, now I'm down."

The host leaned against the table and laughed until his guest was compelled to join. The owner of Casa Grande reminded his friend that one doctrine should not be preached and another practised.

The sheriff walked to the fireplace and threw away his cigarette. As he returned to his seat he said: "You might call me down for some other

gush. I claimed them for my people. I pretended to know them better than you do." There was a rueful pucker of his lips as he spoke, but they suddenly tightened. "They're a lot of doggone, ignorant, stupid cattle!"

"Here! Here!" called Miller, shaking a warning finger. "You're including the Clarks."

"Oh, damn the Clarks!" Bailey leaned petulantly against the table, and turned to gaze out of the open front door, his back to his friend.

"La señorita dam' good es-shooter," was Manuel's sociable warning.

"You stick to the dishes!" The sheriff's command was not intended to be brutal, but in the silence following he looked up; resentment was on the face of his host, mortification on the face of the cook. "I didn't mean that," he confessed, rising and holding out his hand toward Manuel. "I'm acting like a child. Better put me with the dogs."

"Manuel is particular about the dogs," remarked Miller, good-naturedly. "Sit down. Let's finish. You must have had an unusually trying experience this morning."

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Bailey faced the ranchero, and dejectedly explained that he had intimately known the Clarks for the last five years. He had eaten there, slept there, advised them in trouble, rejoiced with them in prosperity. Now, because he must do his duty, Belle proposed to kick him out, to forget the past, that meant so much to him.

"Not a very honourable motive," observed Miller, with surprise.

Bailey again hastily corrected himself. "I didn't mean that. The girl has a high sense of honour; she believes in duty. I shouldn't have said what I did. But to her I am the law. If I execute the writ of ejection, it is I who put them off, not the law. She don't understand how a man can be a friend and put them off their home."

"She'll get over her resentment," Miller soothingly remarked: "She may remain frigid for a few months; let her. She's bound to respect you the more for having done a disagreeable duty."

"Disagreeable! That's not the word. It's alarming; it may change my whole future!"

"You're the greatest fellow to borrow trouble," lightly replied Miller.

Bailey absently shook his head. "You wouldn't say so if it threatened you as it does me."

Miller insisted that he would feel the same under any conditions. There was no prejudging a woman. Even if one did say how the sex might act under certain circumstances, who could guarantee the circumstances? Then there was the item of personal regard; it could not be sincere if it called for the sacrifice of duty; it could not exist at all.

Bailey waved his hand disapprovingly, and regarded his host with silent pity. The ranchero evidently was not in love.

Miller deliberated for some time, then suggested a solution of the difficulty. "Send your deputy to execute the writ."

"He's too hot-headed," objected the sheriff. "He'd herd them off like so many cattle. If any resisted, there'd be work for the coroner."

Miller had still another suggestion. "Your term expires next spring?" Bailey nodded. "Let your successor put them off; I can wait."

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"Good God, man!" said the sheriff, rising and shoving his hands deep into his pockets. "What do you take me for?" His sense of duty was strong again. "You can't mean it. Besides, I want another term."

"I didn't think you'd wait," explained the host. "Still, I didn't know how hard you are hit."

"Hard enough," confessed Bailey, "but not hard enough for that. I'll be all right, Miller." The visitor glanced about for his hat. "I'm going to put those people off to-morrow—resolutely, but kindly. I needed to talk it over with you, though, and I feel better. I'm ashamed that I even hesitated."

"You're disposed to worry, Bailey," said the ranchero. "You try to work out details beforehand. What's the use? Resolve to do a thing, then trust the doing of it for the details. You may be the girl's husband before you're ready to put them off; who knows? Marry her. There's the problem solved!"

The sheriff dolefully shook his head. "Do you forget that it takes two to marry? She's a curious one—head full of moonshine and things."

"What you would call romantic?" asked Miller.

"That's the word—romantic; high notions. I sometimes wonder if it isn't a mistake, her being 'way out in the backwoods."

"The more reason to win her, Bailey," said Miller, rising and laying a hand on his guest's shoulder. "Go right after her; don't wait. You can only fail, at the worst, and that's no disgrace, if you preserve your self-respect."

"I wish I had your even temper!" The sheriff spoke with a generous enthusiasm that embarrassed his host as they left the room.

Near the door opening on the courtyard the two men halted. Manuel had filled a large pan with remnants of the dinner and placed it on the floor by the stove. The dogs ate greedily, the stronger ones disposed to intimidate the weaker; but the cook stood over them, a long-handled spoon in his grasp, and each got his share of food.

"There," observed Miller, "is a lesson in government. Cæsar, the big hound, is a surly brute, but he's amenable to discipline."

"I've been watching," guiltily answered the visitor. "It's not the only lesson Manuel has taught

me to-day. My squatter friends may need thwacking, too; I'll put an iron spoon up my sleeve."

"If you could only use it on all of them!" The ranchero spoke fervently.

Bailey looked up inquiringly.

"That graceful lady over there," was the answer, with a gesture in the direction of Dry Creek. "You can't fight her with iron spoons, nor with shotguns. And the battle 'll not be to the strong alone."

The sheriff smiled sceptically and put on his hat. "Think of me, old man, about this time to-morrow."

"God bless and guide you," cheerily replied Miller. "You'll do what's right. I'd ride over if I could help you."

"Don't," seriously objected Bailey, stepping out of the door. "Look," he called, pointing upward. "A storm's coming. I'll have to ride fast if I get to town dry."

"Take a poncho," urged Miller, turning to the rain-clothing on the wall.

"No," replied Bailey; "I have one tied^{*} to my saddle."

"Look out, Meestah es-Sam, for la señorita," ban-

teringly called Manuel after the men going through the court. He wanted to show that he harboured no resentment for the guest's curt speech to him. "Es-she dam' good es-shooter."

"Oh, yes, you old owl," retorted Bailey, in the same spirit; "I'll send you next time!"

The sun made a sudden rent in the clouds and drenched the earth with cheerfulness, even as the resolution to do his duty at whatever cost had lighted the sheriff's soul.

CHAPTER IV

GO THY WAY FORTH

IT rained the night of Bailey's visit to Casa Grande. Next morning the sky was still cloudy, with occasional showers followed by sunshine. Budding trees sparkled with dripping brilliants, and meadowlarks flocked in Dry Creek pastures.

The way down hill to the turbulent stream was slippery, and a cavalcade of horsemen headed by the sheriff rode slowly into the valley. They were an odd-looking, funereal company, each man wearing a black waterproof or poncho, which concealed under its ample covering the weapons of the wearer, as well as the saddle and much of the horse.

At the Clark gate the posse was halted, and Bailey dismounted, exposing a rifle swung to his saddle under the left stirrup. Without removing his poncho, he quietly walked to the house and called to Belle,

who came out with some sewing, an occupation so unusual in the daytime that the caller stared.

The girl, with a swift glance, took in her surroundings—the horsemen, the sombre capes, the rifle swung to the empty saddle.

“What’s under you-all’s ponchos?” was her greeting.

He drew back the skirt of his garment, and watched her with a smile belying his anxiety.

When she beheld pistols strapped about his waist a flutter came in her throat and her face grew wax-like. As soon as she found voice she asked, thickly :

“What’re you going to do?”

“What I said yesterday—put you off.”

The fingers she laid on the porch-rail trembled, and her eyes blazed at the man’s easy manner. “You put us off!” Her voice was low and tense. “You coward! You sneak! Sold out to that land-grabber——”

“Belle, Belle!” he cried.

At the reproach and suffering of his tone there awoke in her the primitive feminine impulse, when



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dominating the stronger sex, to torture and humble, and she tauntingly called to him:

“Put us off! Try it!”

The sheriff sorrowfully regarded the girl. He forgave the cruel things she had spoken, for he realised that the apprehension and resentment of weeks had found vent in her outburst. But he had resolved to do his duty at any cost, and his one concern now was to do it without a tragedy. He walked closer to the porch and, lowering his voice, gently said:

“You must go, Belle. It’s the order of the court. If I don’t put you off, some one else will. Get out quietly.”

“Never alive,” wilfully declared the girl, backing against the house.

Her mother and brothers joined her and looked questioningly at the sheriff and his posse.

“I’ve come to dispossess the settlers,” said Bailey, trying to speak lightly.

“Why didn’t you fetch some men?” sullenly asked Tom.

“There’s enough, I guess,” answered Bailey. “I want you-all to know I came on business.”

He was the sheriff now, and while parleying his mind had worked rapidly. He saw that it would not be difficult, if the family attempted to resist, to engage them in a discussion of their rights on the front porch while four or five of his men went in at the rear and disarmed the occupants. Once he had their weapons, the rest would be easy.

"Go on and pack, honey," he said, at last. "I'll take my men up to the farthest settler inside the grant line and work down this way. That'll give you three or four hours."

She saw the appeal in his look—all the tenderness he felt for her. She saw, also, resolution, determination, almost cruelty. It was a new view of his character, one that never before had been disclosed, and it satisfied her that he would not change his purpose even for her.

She came forward and wound her arm about a post of the porch. "You may put us off, Sam. We can't help it. But there'll be empty saddles in your crowd when you do!"

"Go on and pack up, I tell you," lightly repeated the sheriff, motioning swiftly two or three times at

her, as if to drive her into the house. "This isn't the end of the world! There'll be other days, Belle, and you-all will be cared for. There's other land right in this county."

The posse moved up the valley, and their leader smiled again. Belle would fight with a shotgun if she fought at all, but he now was satisfied that the family would get out peaceably. Again the melody of larks sounded clamorous, and from brushy hiding-places came the quidado of quail. At one moment the sun blazed fiercely; at the next it was hidden by clouds. Through sunshine or shadow the bird-songs continued as if life-tragedies never could enter this little Eden. As the horsemen advanced the larks would perch by the roadside and whistle, bobbing their heads, twitching their tails and flaunting bright yellow bibs. When the invaders came closer the birds rose and flew ahead a few hundred feet, like winged skirmishers preceding the little body of policemen.

As soon as the sheriff's company halted, ponchos and coats were fastened behind the saddles. The men went at their task earnestly, and one by

one the squatters accepted the inevitable. It is easy for law-breakers to noisily talk of rights and how to maintain them; it is quite different to defy the armed authority of the Commonwealth invading those rights. No sooner had the sheriff this morning crossed the babbling stream at the foot of the grade leading into the valley than the settlement was apprised of the fact. That the officer had brought with him nearly a score of men was enough for the people he had been directed to remove, and they at once accepted the alternative. Under most conditions life and liberty are sweeter than life and imprisonment.

Before the afternoon had worn half away a majority of the squatters loaded their wagons with belongings easiest moved and drove out from the valley, or located on some new claim already selected against such an emergency, beyond the grant lines. A body of twenty men entering each dwelling and door-yard made quick work of the packing, and the first heat of squatter resentment over, it was curious to watch the prevailing harmony. Officers of the court and squatters belonged to the same class. All were primitive, unsordid, and disinclined to monoto-

nous labour, yet untiring if their task involved excitement. All were shrewd in a certain way, yet preserving a childlike faith in life. Energetic neighbours classed such characters as indolent, even shiftless, but it was their simplicity that made them content with bare necessities, if they could but revel in the luxury of almost savage freedom.

At last all the squatters had been removed except the Clarks. The afternoon was hot, the sky cloudless, and bird-notes hushed to an occasional twittering. The water in the creek still rippled, but more drowsily now that the rain had ceased. The posse halted at the enclosure surrounding the home of the fatherless family. Barricades had been placed at the gateway and over doors and windows. When the men saw what was done they fingered the pistols at their waists and unslung their rifles, standing them against the fence. Bailey, as he fastened his mount, deprecated the action of his associates, and stated that he considered their precautions unnecessary. He hung his own belt and pistols over the horn of his heavy saddle.

The sheriff cheerfully proceeded alone to the

house. The warlike appearance amused him, and all question of how Belle intended to fight was decided by the barricading. Miller was wrong for once, and the intimate friend of the family right. The girl was sufficiently undeveloped and masculine to battle like a man, which made the officer's duty easier. He unwound the rawhide thongs that fastened the higher bars and stepped over the lower into the yard.

A distant horseman stood beside his mount in the shadow of an oak where the road begins its descent into Dry Creek. No one, as yet, had observed him, and from his manner he had sought to avoid notice. A restless impulse stronger than curiosity led the master of Casa Grande to this point, where he had arrived at the time the posse halted. He, too, had seen the barricaded doors and windows, the preparations of the men, and his heart throbbed anxiously. He felt from the beginning that the two women would be safe from violence at the sheriff's hands, but the actions of the posse were threatening. It was a relief, therefore, to see their leader proceed alone to the dwelling.

The relief was but momentary; before the officer was halfway to the house a shot cracked. His men caught their rifles and ran toward him. He motioned them back, unfastened the white kerchief about his throat, waved it, and advanced again. A second time a rifle was discharged, and the bullet whirred close to his head. The alert, expectant attitude of the men was ignored by their leader, who paused a moment to deliberate. He perceived, at last, why the inmates of the house persisted in shooting. Belle had stated that she would not leave the place alive. Was she inviting destruction? The instinctive resentment of a man against the folly of a woman who is dear to him roused in Bailey a desire to use the rod on Belle. He turned to the woodpile, shouldered an axe, and wrathfully advanced on the barricaded entrance, convinced that the demonstration against him was simply a bluff.

As the man on the hill was wondering at the rashness of the man in the door-yard, there came a puff of smoke, a report, and Bailey staggered and went down. He was up again immediately, Belle at his

side almost as soon as he rose, but his left arm hung useless.

At the sheriff's fall his comrades, ready for action, swarmed into the door-yard, but when the girl ran out most of them respectfully held back, only the deputy and one or two of the more intimate advancing. The girl stared shrinkingly at his wounded limb, a crimson splotch on the sleeve spreading wider. Only a moment did she hesitate, then hastened into the house and called for water and bandages.

Bailey's companions urged him to ride at once to town to have the wound dressed; they would follow with the rebellious family. He stood resolute, however, and waited for Belle.

She quickly returned, prepared to bind his hurt, her mother and Wash following. "What have I done!" she brokenly exclaimed. "What have I done!"

When the sheriff was comfortably seated on the porch she rolled up his sleeve. The bullet had severed an artery, and the pulsating crimson jet terrified her, for she knew that he might die unless the flow were checked.

"I don't know how to stop it," she said, her hand clasped over the place.

He directed her to twist a tourniquet above the wound, and the bleeding quickly ceased.

The men gathered about their leader, ready with rough services and eager to advise, but none more skilful than the girl and her mother, who tightly bandaged the arm with many folds of cloth.

Belle waited a moment to glance at the patient. His face was ghastly, and he strove to hide his suffering under a smile, but the sweat on his brow and the glitter of his eyes betrayed him.

"Oh, Sam," she cried, "this is terrible! I'm killing you!"

He shifted toward a column of the porch, his body dizzily swaying, but he resolutely braced himself against the support and told her to finish the bandaging.

She had fastened the ends of the cloth, when Miller came up. His face was very grave, and as soon as he saw a crimson stain slowly saturating the bandage, the tourniquet above it, his expression changed to anxiety.



"How badly are you hurt?" he asked Bailey, who was supporting the wounded arm with his sound one.

"Not so bad."

"Any bones broken?"

"Perhaps."

Miller asked the meaning of the tourniquet and the stain in the bandage.

"An artery's cut."

"This won't do, old man," kindly protested Miller. "You're in no condition to stand the trip to town. The tourniquet is too tight. Your hand is turning black."

"It'll go," irritably declared Bailey. The ranchoero's presence nettled him, now that he was wounded.

Miller insisted that it would be folly to ride to Santa Rosa with his arm in that condition. "Let me tie up the artery and put a splint on the arm. I've had some experience."

Belle, with a feeling of relief, made room for the newcomer. The strain was telling on her.

Bailey weakly objected, however, but before he

knew it Miller had unwound the bandage and loosened the tourniquet. The ranchero took from his pocket a farrier's knife, and drew out of the heavy bone handle a pair of pincers, with which he caught the end of the artery, and asked Belle to fetch some thread and tie it.

The air was still warm, but Bailey's teeth chattered in spite of his effort to prevent them. When the girl attempted to fasten the thread about the blood-vessel her hands suddenly dropped. Miller glanced up; her face was colourless, with a look about the lips as of one ready to swoon.

He flung an arm about her and sharply asked if she was going to faint.

His clasp roused her, and she resolutely drew away from him. "No, I'm not," she answered, and tied the knot.

Once again they washed the wound and dressed it with simple liniments of the household and bound it up, a splint along the fractured bone. They worked silently and swiftly, for the sheriff's breath came short and the sweat stood on his face. Belle motioned her mother to the place beside Miller, then

took a handkerchief and wiped the sufferer's brow, her arm round his broad shoulders. The sheriff's drawn lips curved, his breath came deeper, and all at once life's bitter regrets had vanished.

Belle thus held the patient, unconscious of the men about her. Miller was not a little pleased at her attitude, which meant so much to Bailey, although little more to her than an act of friendship, the impulse of a generous nature. She, however, could not keep her glance from Miller's hands, so deftly and firmly did he use his fingers. She noticed that they were shapely and well-kept, in spite of signs of toil. They expressed strength and resolution, which she felt were elements of his character.

Even Bailey was attracted by his friend's skill. "Where did you learn to do this?" he asked.

Miller softly laughed. "I don't know much. I've sometimes helped a surgeon of the army—we crossed the continent together. He's a connection by marriage—Dr. Payne, of the San Francisco Presidio."

Bailey nodded approval. He remarked that already he felt easier.

Miller called to Wash, and asked him to take Peggy, go to Casa Grande, and hitch to his light wagon the horse in the stable there, and come right back, so Mr. Bailey could reach town quicker and more comfortably than in the saddle.

"No, you don't," objected the sheriff. "I'm going back the way I came—with my men."

"But, Bailey——"

"Enough said, Miller. I want Wash to hitch up his own rig. I must take the family with me."

"What for?" cried Belle.

"Pack up the few things you'll need for a day or two's stay in town," firmly answered Bailey, rising.

"Sam! No. We'll do anything you ask. Not that." A new dread made the girl speak sharply, and she trembled.

"The sheriff must do his duty," Bailey sadly replied. "There's no other way."

Miller was startled at the turn of affairs. He now realised that the Clarks were at least in contempt of court, perhaps criminally liable. It would not do for the sheriff to temporise with them, especially on the eve of his campaign for re-election.

"I'll go with you," said the ranchero. "We can bail them out, and they can come back here and stay till they have made arrangements to move."

"We want no favours from him," said Belle to the sheriff. "We'd rather go to jail."

Bailey was pleased at the girl's resentment, and kindly declined Miller's offer. He said it would be too late for bail that night, and he would put them in the hotel, anyway.

An awkward silence fell on the group, and Miller saw that he was no longer needed. "Can I do anything?" he asked.

"No, Miller; we'll get on very well now."

The group in the door-yard watched the ranchero ride away. Above the quiet rushing of the creek sounded the patter of Peggy's hoofs until she had forded the stream; then the watchers dispersed.

"Any one could ride well on such a horse," remarked Belle to Bailey. "The mare takes the trail like a bird."

Bailey sighed and moved away. She spoke of the mare, but he knew her thoughts were following the rider.



CHAPTER V

AMONG THORNS

THE Clarks went, under arrest, with the wounded leader and the posse to Santa Rosa. It was a tedious and distressful journey, owing to the sheriff's suffering, which grew more acute the farther he rode.

When the party reached town the prisoners were quartered at the hotel, and Bailey hastened to the doctor's, where the wounded man was put to bed. His arm had been crudely bandaged, and the long trip increased the customary inflammation until the place was so badly swelled that it was impossible to tell the condition of the fractured bone.

In the morning fever developed, and before evening the sheriff was slightly delirious. During the next two days these disturbing symptoms continued, and no one was allowed to talk business with the pa-

tient, who lay passive and indifferent from heavy doses of opium.

On the third morning, after a family conference, it was decided that Bailey must be paying their expenses at the hotel, which amounted to at least ten dollars a day—an extravagant courtesy.

"I don't see why we should take his money," Belle considerately remarked. "It may be days before we can get away; let's go to jail. If the court wants to punish us for defending our rights, the county must take care of us!"

Mrs. Clark demurred, for they always had been good people, never before getting in the grip of the law. She wavered between the disgrace of imprisonment and the humiliation of accepting charity—the one quite as repugnant as the other to their independent natures.

"It's no disgrace to go to jail, maw, for what we've done," insisted Belle. "I'll die before I admit that we did wrong."

"We shot the sheriff," protested Mrs. Clark, who was not endowed with the martyr-like disposition of her daughter.

"The sheriff had no right to come in our house. Father always said that an American could keep any one out of his home, even if he must shoot to do it."

So it was arranged for the family by the deputy sheriff, without consulting his principal, and before night they were imprisoned on a charge of attempting to murder an officer of court. The subordinate official was guided by his own idea of the indignity done his superior, and supposed that the wounded man felt about the crime as he himself felt. The judge, sharing the prejudice of the deputy, fixed the prisoners' bail at fifty thousand dollars.

The sheriff raged when he learned what his deputy had done—the very thing he had been anxious to prevent; but matters could not be bettered until he was in condition to attend in person to the business.

When Bailey was well enough to appear before the court and ask a reduction of the prisoners' bail, the judge, old and peevish, stubbornly refused, for the sheriff's face still told of physical suffering, and his arm carried in a sling was an unimpeachable witness that a crime had been attempted on him. There

was no alternative, then, but to find bail in the amount originally fixed.

At the end of a week Bailey had secured only ten thousand dollars of the bond. He was asking his friends to go surety for an unknown family who had resisted a process of court. There was not even a vote among them, and everywhere he was met with the question why he interested himself in getting bail. The real reason could not be given unless he confessed that he hoped to make Belle his wife.

The prospect of making the girl his wife had grown very shadowy since his wounding, for had she sincerely loved him she could not have shot him. He did not reason it out, but the depression of all the succeeding days resulted from the unconscious perception of this truth, and at the end of the second week he was in greater perplexity than ever.

To add to his depression, confinement was beginning to tell on Belle. The entire family had rather enjoyed the first two or three days of enforced idleness. Mrs. Clark declared that it was the only time since she was born that she had been rested. Belle

had been under a severe strain the day they were dispossessed, and rest and seclusion were what she needed. But the end of the week found them ready for action once more, which meant liberty. The end of the second week found them fretful, with evident signs of pining in Belle.

Another consultation was now held, at which the sheriff was chief advocate. He proposed to ask Miller to furnish the balance of the surety, which Belle vetoed at once. Again she was ready to die rather than accept a favour from that man. She dominated the family, not because of wilfulness, but because of her good sense and unselfishness; and all yielded to her objection against accepting Miller's assistance because she was so determined, although none fully shared her sentiments.

The third week passed, Belle growing more droopy in spite of her effort not to show it, and the others more restless. Bailey had arranged from the first to make Wash a messenger in the sheriff's office, thus giving the boy the liberties of a "trusty." His duties brought him often into the courtroom, and his absorbed interest in the cases on trial at-

tracted the notice of the Judge, who, with all his crustiness, felt kindly toward young people.

One day, when the courtroom was empty, the Judge and the boy had a long talk together beginning by His Honour asking if Wash would like to be a lawyer. The old man read promise in the lad, his frank ingenuousness, his keenly inquiring intellect; it carried him back to his own youth, quite as humble as that of this offspring of the hills. When he had learned the family history, he finished by telling Wash that he had concluded to reduce their bail.

The principal diversion of the family was Bailey's visits and the boy's accounts of his daily experiences. The interview with the Judge was of absorbing interest to them all, and Wash minutely recounted it, not a little pleased at his own importance.

"When he asked me," said Wash, "if I wanted to be a lawyer, I told him I'd rather be a ranchero like Mr. Miller and raise fine cattle and horses. The Judge looked funny, and said that Mr. Miller is an unusual man, typical of the South, and if he gave the same attention to making money as to raising stock he would be rich."

"You and the Judge must be pretty thick," interjected Tom. "What does he know about Miller, anyway?"

"They're good friends," replied Wash. "He goes every year to Casa Grande to fish and hunt—two or three times. He said it is a charming place to visit, and it made him mad because the squatters bothered the ranchero."

"I suppose that's the reason he piled on our bail," growled Tom.

"Just wait till I get through," said Wash. "I told the Judge that we had lived eight years on our place, spent lots of money in improving it, and I asked him if he thought it fair for the Government to come in at this late time and put us off. He said the Government never had owned the Mexican grants; simply held them in trust for the ones that country had given them to. But I argued that the Government, in that case, never should have let us go on the land; should have given notice it was not public domain."

"Whew!" exclaimed Belle. "What big words we use when we talk to judges!"

"I'll bet I've learned more than a hundred big words since we came here."

"Now, Washie, don't you get saucy."

"You le' me 'lone," replied the boy, forgetting his pedantic phrases. "You use big words yourself. The other day, after Mr. Miller——"

From out the tussle on the floor Wash's voice good-naturedly called, "Ma!"

"Oh, dear," complained the widow, "I'll be glad when you children get out of here."

"Go on with your story, Wash," said Belle, when order had been restored.

"The Judge said I'd make a lawyer, because I had given good reason why we never should have been allowed on that land. He said any other landlord would have to keep off trespassers, or lose his lands after a certain number of years of adverse possession, but the American people required each settler to prove that he had a right to enter vacant lands. 'Suppose he can't?' said I. 'Then he'd better keep off,' said he; 'and when a court has decided that the land is not the settler's, he must move off at once.' "

"It's easy to see that every one in this town is against the settlers," said Belle. "We'll never get out on bail."

"We may," hopefully declared Wash. "The Judge and I talked about bail and the sheriff and Mr. Miller. I told him that Sam is our friend, and we didn't intend to hurt him that day—just wanted him to keep away. I even told him that Mr. Miller had offered to go with us that night and bail us out. He asked me how long we had known the sheriff, and if he came often to see us. When I told him, he said, 'H'm,' and pulled his beard. He asked if Mr. Miller came to——"

The boy did not finish. His sister went swiftly to him and flung an arm about him. "Don't you know, Wash, you mustn't talk about those things?"

"But, sis, he asked me. He won't tell. When he wanted to know about you, I told him there isn't a prettier nor a smarter girl in this county. Then he went to a window and stood a long time looking out. I thought he was through, and I tiptoed away; but he called me back, and said he would reduce our bail to five thousand dollars each, and if Mr. Miller

would go on our bond the court would require no other surety. So there!"

The other members of the family looked at the girl. In the dim light she scarcely could see the appeal in their glances, but she felt it in their manner. "Let's think about it," she kindly suggested.

Wash felt his spirits rise, and immediately told the sheriff of Belle's decision. Bailey met the Judge waiting for the mail, and found that Wash had correctly reported his decision. The official put the boy on a saddle-horse and posted him off to Miller with a note.

Early next morning the ranchero came to town, Wash with him, prepared to secure liberty for the Clarks. Belle would not thank him for his kindness, but explained that she was willing to accept for the sake of the others. She herself would die before she would ask any one to bail her out.

Miller assured her it was his friendship for Bailey that prompted his action; she need feel under obligation to no one but the sheriff.

In the courtroom, when the party appeared to arrange the bail, His Honour admonished the Clarks

that he accepted Mr. Miller as their surety since he had learned that the ranchero harboured no resentment against them, and now they would be accountable to their neighbour for good behaviour. As Mr. Bailey did not choose to prosecute them for assaulting him, the charge against them would rest for the present, to be revived whenever they should become unruly. The old jurist called Belle to his side and kindly took her hand, which he studied, then softly clasped it.

"There are three kinds of women in this world, young lady: the few feminine; a greater number mannish; the great majority ordinary. You'll never be ordinary. I thought when you first came before me that you were mannish—and with your face! But this hand—it is strong and friendly; your eyes and lips—they are my own mother's. . . ."

The fatherless girl flung herself down, her head on his knee, her hand gripping his. He clasped her quivering body with the wordless sympathy he might have given a daughter, held her a moment, and gently raised her.

"I shall keep my eye on you," he somewhat testily

declared, to hide his embarrassment at this outburst of feeling. "You must show me that I haven't misjudged you. Now you may go."

Everybody but Belle shook hands with Miller and thanked him for what he had done. The old Judge took him by the arm and led him away.

On the homeward road the ranchero passed the Clarks driving in silence. "Come and take dinner with me," he called. "It will be ready when you reach Casa Grande, and Manuel always has a plate or two extra." He did not wait for their acceptance. Scarcely a day passed without his inviting some one in the same offhand manner.

The little group in the wagon gazed after Miller without comment. Peggy appeared to fly with him over the smooth road, and even his back expressed confidence and resolution.

Belle's emotions were conflicting. Her resentment against him had grown with her days of confinement, and she realised more clearly than ever how unjust he had been. It seemed to her that all the misery of the last three weeks—their remorse, humiliation and rebellion—should be laid at his

door. It had been his doing that they were imprisoned, and he merited the hatred she felt for him.

And yet she caught herself measuring each man by this one, who had greatly wronged her and her family. Even Bailey, with all his devotion, suffered in the comparison, and she had tried, with new resolution, to make up for the unhappiness caused him. She wondered if this would be the end of acquaintance with their neighbour—he seemed so indifferent.

“Didn’t he take off his hat grand!” declared Wash, after the horseman had passed. “Let’s go to dinner at Casa Grande.”

“I’ll not interfere this time,” Belle replied; “but you can let me out at the big gate, and I’ll walk home.”

“Me, too,” added Tom.

“And me,” said their mother. “You’d better drive straight home, Wash.”

The boy cracked his whip, and whistled as if there might be other opportunities for dining at Casa Grande.

CHAPTER VI

A CUNNING WORKMAN

WHEN the Clarks, on their homeward way, had reached the brow of the hill overlooking Dry Creek, another proceeding of the master of Casa Grande roused Belle's unquiet resentment. About halfway up the valley the band of Indians who had harvested Miller's hay the year before were building a stone fence along his eastern boundary.

It meant an inclosure that would completely exclude squatters and their animals, and, while the girl recognised this as the most peaceable way to keep out intruders, yet the impassable barrier was an assertion of ownership unbearable to those who long had roamed these hills at will. More than that : it became a challenge to open resistance.

Miller had not been unmindful of his neighbours' attitude, but the right to his own must be asserted.

For two years his boundary toward the squatters had been daily patrolled by a mounted vaquero, and thus he had prevented their livestock from trespassing or from mixing with his herd. The decision of court lately rendered made it possible now to maintain a more permanent barrier. He would build his close; if the squatters broke it, the consequences would be theirs.

An abundance of suitable stone was near the boundary line, and, with the help of teams and sleds, the Indians built rapidly. They began at the gorge of the Aguas Frias, behind Casa Grande, whence the wall would extend five miles, past the Clarks' to the northern line of the grant, along which a stout rail fence separated it from the Los Tollones.

The progress of the work was moodily watched by the neighbours. It was well done—better than the white men would have built, and as they followed the constructing and noted its solidity and regularity, their resentment against the owner of the land was gradually changed, for the time, to resentment against his patient labourers.

Patience and persistence! The men who knew

neither the one trait nor the other could not help taking umbrage at the steadfastness of the Indians. This alien band, of different speech and customs, was doing the work and receiving the pay that the white men considered their own by right of birth. These labourers, like the horses they drove in the sleds, were plodders, too dull to be influenced by either entreaty or command, and gradually they became typical of persecution.

Miller felt the growing animosity against his red men, and kept near them at labour. What they may have felt, only a reader of signs could fathom. They held stolidly to their task, and soon were near the Clarks', where at least the master found diversion.

Miller had permitted the family to occupy the old house while they prepared a new dwelling. They were quite humble since their arrest, a dread of prosecution still lingering in their fancies, and they went diligently at their tasks. The land selected for their future home was higher on the Napa hills, and a comparatively flat piece offered a natural building site. It was watered by a copious spring, and a grove of pines would furnish material for the im-

provements. The two boys, with occasional help from a neighbour, cut and hewed logs ready for use and split "shakes" for the roof.

Wash, alert as usual, frequently came to interview the fence-builders. He always had regarded a stone wall as a safe harbour for squirrels and other small pests, but the care taken by the Indians to leave no crevice wide enough for a lizard to hide in converted the boy to the value of such a barrier.

On these visits he liked to discuss their new house with Miller, who was kept informed of each day's progress. All the timbers were hewed and ready before the fence was completed, and the family planned a trip to town to get doors, windows and such materials as must be purchased.

"How would you like to surprise the folks, Wash?" Miller asked, as the wall was about finished. "When they go to town to-morrow we might take the Indians and put up the cabin before night."

The boy's eyes danced at the prospect, and the burden of the plan kept him more mysterious than usual as he cheerfully did the evening chores.

Next morning Wash remained behind without

rousing suspicion. As soon as the others were out of sight he and Miller and the Indians proceeded with the house-raising. The old home was taken for a model, and the hiss of saw and the bark of axe echoed merrily.

By noon the walls were up, and long before sun-down the roof was on and covered with "shakes," and a wide chimney of rough stones laid up against the north end, outside. The house contained a big living-room and two smaller bedrooms, porch to the west, and space on the east for more rooms to be added later; everything complete except doors, windows and floors.

As the sun neared the western hills a dwelling stood on the opposite slope of Dry Creek, where in the morning only trees had been. The white of freshly hued timbers was suffused by the glow of the reddening west, and the structure showed warm and inviting. Then the men who had wrought the wood-magic gathered a moment to gaze at what had been effected. They watched the colour deepen on the new building; they looked with satisfaction on that other cabin below, of which this was the counterpart; they

glanced a moment at the flaming sun, the pale blue of heaven, and, gathering their belongings, they and the master left as simply as they had come.

Soon after the house-builders had departed the Clarks drove down the hill into Dry Creek. Wash had lighted a fire in their old cabin and was busy with the evening duties. The three in the wagon saw the smoke rising from the chimney, saw the hillside beyond where the new cabin glowed in the light of the setting sun, and they guessed why the boy had not gone with them in the morning. Each divined it in his own way, with his own emotion, and silently entered the door-yard.

The young people, without a word, unhitched and cared for the horses, their mother going listlessly into the house. She removed hat and wrap and stood in the doorway looking to the east. On the hillside, bathed in rose-colour, stood an almost completed house—doors, chimney, roof, all plainly visible, with walls as if aflame. It startled her to a consciousness of its meaning.

The woman was no longer young. The last eight years had brought sorrow, but withal the current of

their existence had been deep and placid, and she had asked no more than to end her days in the little glen and mingle her dust with that of the man who always had been good to her. But that cabin up there . . . !

She stood nervously twisting her apron through bony, calloused fingers, and weakly leaned her head against the casing of the door, in and out of which her feet would no more pass. Her body stiffened to its full length, and she clutched at the throat of her garment; her breath caught convulsively, and, sinking on the threshold, she yielded to her grief. The old life was ended; they must begin anew.

Belle came slowly back from the barn. There was a droop in her figure that betokened something besides weariness. She stood at the pump with the others, washing off the dust of the road, but she kept her gaze from the cabin on the hill.

Wash casually remarked, after a silence he no longer could endure, "Pretty quick work." He twisted his head in the direction of the new cabin.

Belle did not reply.



A CUNNING WORKMAN

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"Indians know how to do things," again ventured the boy.

His sister was looking away from him, and from the new cabin.

"Are you mad, sis? Did you want to help?" There was a note of disappointment in the question.

"It was a dear thing, Wash. But why did you do it?"

"We wanted to surprise you."

"You have."

"But not that way," he protested. "We wanted you to be glad."

She shook her head and walked to the house. A month ago the hills were hers, the woods, the sunshine, and slumber profound and restful, almost dreamless. To-day, although the hills, the woods, the sunshine still were hers, there had been added something—something she could not name, yet was conscious of from the mist that too often dimmed her vision, the swelling of her throat, the catching of her breath. And her slumber—even her daylight hours no longer were dreamless.

As the girl had rounded into womanhood, existence was joyously simple. Like nature's other nurslings, she grew up innocent and unafraid. But the story of Eden must be renewed in each earnest life whenever the fruit is tasted that reveals the soul of us. During all her past she had regarded the opposite sex concretely, as men. They had formed a class, and she had liked them, even envied them, and in many things had imitated them. Now she caught herself thinking of one man, who represented her ideal of courage and dignity, and she was finding new gladness in being a woman, in thrilling to his word, his look.

The cabin on the hillside—it was the work of his hands. Why had he done it? And she hated him so bitterly. Yet he had built it to-day—a constant reminder of himself.

She went into her bedroom, closed the door, and looked out the window at their future home, growing distant in the deepening gloom. He had planned it—he had planned it! The thought beat in her brain with every throb of her heart, and something swelled in her throat. She flung herself on the bed

and buried her face in the pillow to smother the sobs
that no longer would down.

An hour later Mrs. Clark came softly into the room. Belle lay just as she had thrown herself, and the mother gazed long and wistfully at her sleeping daughter, then gently drew a cover over her.

CHAPTER VII

THE RAIN IS OVER

MAY was nearly past, and with it the rainy season. The verdant mantle of the fields was turning amber; the bawling of calves and the answering low of dams filled the valley of the Calabezas, except the southernmost end, where a waving meadow of wild grass was fit for the scythe.

Here was the hay-field of the ranch, a level green of wild oats reaching to a horse's withers, across hundreds of acres securely fenced from wandering cattle. The crop was now at its best, and should be harvested within a fortnight. There were Indians enough to mow the grass, and Miller had arranged, on the day after the building of the Clarks' dwelling, to move them from Dry Creek and quarter them near the meadow.

Early the next morning a clatter of hoofs in the

courtyard, the furious barking of the dogs, precipitately fetched the Casa Grande household from their beds. In the faint dawn they recognised Belle, a rifle across her shoulder, her horse breathing hard.

Some time during the night an ambushed attack had been made on one of the cabins housing the red men. Volley after volley had been fired on them, arousing the inmates of the other cabins to go out for battle. The attacking party had fled before the charge of the Indians, and the trail of the aggressors had been followed to the cabin of one of the squatters, which now was besieged by the trailers. The other squatters would gather to help their neighbours, and Miller must hasten if he would prevent bloodshed, perhaps slaughter.

The ranchero galloped alone with Belle to Dry Creek, and took no arms, not even a knife. At the foot of the grade into the valley he asked the girl not to follow him. "It's no place for a woman," he said, and he said it kindly.

"It's no place for a lone man," she quickly replied. "The squatters aren't friendly, and the In-

dians are mad. They shot at me this morning when I rode over there."

"No, Belle. There's no way so safe. Neither side will fire on a lone man. Now go, please."

She rode away in the direction of their dwelling, and watched him fearlessly advance to where the Indians were ambushed. Some men were inside the house, and the windows were barricaded. The Indians, inadequately armed, were sheltered behind trees and outbuildings, waiting an opportunity to kill.

Miller called off his labourers for a parley. It was an unsatisfactory conference, since their knowledge of Spanish, the only language both understood, was inadequate to express their feelings. He made out, however, that one of their number had been wounded, and they demanded as indemnity a pair of horses. He agreed to give them what they demanded, but they wanted the horses from the offending squatters, or else they would kill the first man that came out of the cabin.

The other squatters were gathering to the help of their neighbours, each armed with a rifle, and all

crack shots, but they numbered only ten or twelve against thirty or forty Indians. There were sensible, determined men in the relief party, and Miller talked over the situation with them. Many lives might be sacrificed if the red men were not pacified, and the ranchero, after stating the demand of his labourers, proposed to pay for the horses if the aggressors would give them up.

The offer was rejected by the besieged, who determined to make no concessions whatever. The Indians might be damned, the presence of the neighbours giving courage to the mischief-makers, and the others were but lukewarm in advocating any compromise.

It was nearly noon when Manuel rode over to see how Miller was progressing. The ranchero was losing temper at the insolent attitude of the squatters, and he sent the old soldier back to get all the arms and ammunition in the big house, which were distributed among the little band of warriors, and they prepared for a swift attack.

The neighbours had gathered close to the cabin of the besieged, and, finding themselves surrounded

by well-armed red men, each protected by some natural defence, they went into the house.

As Miller, with a half-dozen warriors, was deploying behind the cabin, he encountered Belle. She assured him that no women or children were there, and he went up to a large boulder on the hillside, loosened the rock and sent it crashing into the house. It smashed the stone chimney and destroyed the end wall. With bundles of dry brush the red men then stole up in the rear, protected by the stable, and threw the inflammable material against the house, set fire to it and, still protected by any object that might hide the body of a man, closed around their victims.

The fire soon caught the dwelling, and a man came out with a flag of truce. Miller met him, and at once made terms, the same as proposed by himself earlier in the day, and called off his warriors, but too late, however, for the white men to save the building.

That night the Indians were guarded by the entire force from Casa Grande, the men sleeping about a watch-fire. The next day Miller hauled them to



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the valley of the Casa Grande, where his own dwelling would intervene between the squatters and the Indians. The entire day, however, was consumed in the removal, and the master felt, when he retired that night, much as he imagined the red men must have felt in the morning. A new problem had been added to his cares; a new danger threatened the white men in their own folly. He must prevent a spark from being thrown among his high explosives, that would destroy the entire settlement in Dry Creek, and to do this he must be ever near his workmen.

In the fragrant dawn of the next day the mowers took their places on the hay field, only their shoulders visible above the standing grain. They wore no hats, and as they moved to and fro at work they appeared like swimmers in a placid lake. The verdure stretched away on every side, like a level sea, the bleaching seed pods giving an effect of mist on green-blue water. At noon the scythes had swept wide aisles through the compact growth and deep-cushioned the floors with fading green. At night the green had turned to honey-colour.

Harvesting went uneventfully along, and the hay lay curing in yellowing heaps. The crop should be stored as soon as cured, to save it from summer rains, and the hauling of it to the sheds Miller had expected to have done by his neighbours. Under present conditions he could hardly trust them, and the only thing to do was to rely on his own teams with the Indian teamsters. They had succeeded very well in hauling stones for the new wall, and he would put them to the test with the hay crop.

Two weeks had passed since haying began, and the grass was nearly all moved. The teams were hauling away the hay in fragrant wagon loads, and Miller was congratulating himself on the serenity of their progress and taking some credit for the watchful guard he had kept. Towards sundown he strolled to the barn to see how nearly it was filled, and as he returned he noticed half a dozen horsemen ride up to the Indians in the hay-field, the actions of the strangers not at all friendly.

The ranchero galloped down to the newcomers, and examined, as he went, the revolver strapped to the horn of his saddle. The strangers, all well

armed, were friends of the squatters, and on their way from Santa Rosa had planned to assist Miller's neighbours in persecuting him by driving the Indians from the field, as none of the red men had weapons. Miller rode close to the invaders before drawing rein, and he noticed the mowers, one after another, stop and gaze curiously at the white men.

"Gentlemen," asked the ranchero, "what can I do for you?" His voice was pleasant, but with a dominant ring.

The men grinned at him, conscious of superior numbers. Two moved as if to flank him.

Miller's hand flashed in a curve away from his waist, and the nearest rider halted hard, gazed down the barrel of a revolver, and on to the face of the man behind the weapon.

Another, who had not observed Miller's face, cried, "Down with him!" and spurred his mount.

The revolver cracked, and the horse dropped, the rider sprawling at the feet of the master of the grant, who, smoking weapon in hand, coolly dismounted; he felt sure of himself, for he had tried his opponents.

"Close up," was his next command, to keep the invaders in front of him, and they obeyed. Then they saw that they themselves were surrounded.

For a score of the mowers, each a born warrior, had silently gathered. They had stripped to the waist in the heat of the day, and their bodies glistened with sweat, the muscles playing smoothly over the round barrel of their ribs. A red cloth bound about each head confined mane-like hair that fell to their shoulders. In their hands were scythes.

It was for but a swift moment, yet the air was tense with watchfulness; even the horses forgot to move. The low of far-away cattle, the bark of a distant dog, the faint "oo-ee" of a vaquero sounded painfully distinct. The swarthy faces of the mowers were expressionless, but the eyes under their banded manes gleamed like furnace openings that show liquid fury beyond. What if they should close on the white marauders? What if Miller could no longer control these silent, almost spectral figures? The same thought came to the minds of all, for Miller remarked, in an even tone:

"Gentlemen, good-night. Go quick."

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The white men, sullen and ashamed, sped to the south; the red men as swiftly dispersed, and when Miller climbed to his saddle the lithe bodies of the mowers once more swung mechanically to the sweep of scythes. These primitive labourers would not again be molested; they had proved themselves fighters.

The master of Casa Grande returned dejectedly up the slope to the dwelling. The sun had set and the shadows above the eastern hills were arching toward the west. Among the trees on the trail to Dry Creek a figure moved smoothly. Miller regarded it absently. He was brooding over the temper of the squatters, and in the reaction following his meeting with them and the weariness from a long day's labour, he wondered if it were worth while to live longer among the snarling pack. Some movement of the climbing figure, a graceful, dainty motion, betrayed her, and he drew rein to watch her disappear over the top of the hill. He regretted that she had witnessed the meeting in the harvest field. Then the bell clanged from the watch tower, and his pony bounded away to the stable.

Throughout the harvest it had been ideal weather; now that it was nearly over, a puff of white, as a cloud filled its fleecy sail, caused Manuel anxiously to watch the heavens. A few days more, and the hay would be stored—then rain would not so much matter. The master rode up as the cook scanned the sky, and the weather prophet was asked to make a forecast.

"Yeh," was the answer; "by 'n by rain."

"To-day or to-morrow?"

"This week, me theenk," was the safe reply. It was now Wednesday.

Miller thought of Wash Clark and his team. The lad might be hired to help out and hasten the storing of the crop. Perhaps his friendship might stand between the ranchero and the prejudice of the squatters, and the man rode to Dry Creek. It was days since he had been to the Clarks', and he noticed many changes. The spring had been piped to the cabin, and already a garden was starting, and vines and shrubs budded here and there. The yard had been enclosed, out-buildings erected, and the domestic animals and

fowls were quite at home in their new domiciles.

Mrs. Clark came out and hesitated in her refusal of Miller's offer. Five dollars a day would help just now when they needed many things.

"Wash 'll be here in a minute," she explained.
"Perhaps we'd better leave it to him."

Belle stepped to the porch. "We can't spare Wash and the team," she said. "We have many things to do."

"I'll pay seven and a half the rest of the week," ventured the master of Casa Grande. "Every day counts." He glanced at the clouds.

"You know how we feel. I'd refuse twenty dollars!"

"Wash! Wash!" called his mother, waving her apron as she caught sight of her son. When he came up she told him of Miller's offer.

"Yes, I'll go," gladly replied the boy.

"No, Wash, we're too busy now," insisted his sister.

"Only three or four days," protested the boy.
"You can wait. We need the money."

He hastened into the hills to catch the team, and Miller, doubtful of his advantage, rode away.

When Wash fetched the horses to the gate Belle sat on the porch.

"Are you mad, sis?" he good-naturedly asked.

"Yes, I am."

"Because he likes me better 'n you," the boy teasingly continued. . .

"It's no such thing!"

Wash laughed at what he considered unnecessary warmth in her contradiction, and banteringly added: "He can ride better 'n you." It was the first time the brother had admitted that any one could ride better than his sister.

She did not answer this last stricture; she saw she was being teased.

When Wash was ready to start away, he somewhat irrelevantly announced: "He likes you, too."

"I hate him!"

The boy again laughed, rather sceptically this time, and Belle rose to enter the house.

"How do you know he likes me?"

Wash deliberately looked over horses, harness and

wagon before he climbed to his seat, and answered : "When you rode to Casa Grande about the fight between the squatters and the Indians he said you were a brave woman."

He had called her a brave woman. Did he mean it?—did he mean it? Her ideal of life was to be a brave woman, and a brave man had called her that. Once again the little room with white curtains and white bed became silent witnesses of the girl's happy tears.

Wash and team were kept busy at Casa Grande. The clouds gathered slowly, but with increasing thickness. Friday night a light shower fell; then the sky cleared till Saturday night, when the storm broke heavily, the rain starting melodies on the red-tiled roof, which rang like metallic plates to the patterning hammers of raindrops. The last load of hay had been protected, and long before midnight the wearied household was sleeping, only the master stirring. Out through the windows a veil of mist obscured the stars and lay like a downy counterpane over the earth. About the hearth, in the glow of burnt-out logs, stretched the dogs. As the owner

stood a moment regarding them, they thumped indolent tails and drew their breath deep with content.

Manuel rose on his cot in a corner and called, softly: "Dam' fine rain, Meestah Jone."

"Did I waken you, old man?" was the apologetic reply. "Good-night," and the master disappeared into his own room.

Wash went home after breakfast next morning. If he could be at Casa Grande, where at least one person understood him, it meant living. To associate with a masterful man, to be noticed by him, to be trusted by him—these are influences that find the soul of youth.

Miller followed close behind Wash to Dry Creek. The man first had ridden to the glen of the Aguas Frias, where azaleas were banked in creamy-white bloom, and he had cut a swelling armful of the fragrance. His victory over Belle in securing Wash rankled in his memory; he would trust these white-winged messengers to plead his necessity. Belle saw the horseman coming—the mass of flowers first—and wondered. He rode to the porch-rail and, with



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sunshine in his glance, held out the flashing bunch of colour still gemmed by raindrops.

"I've brought you a thanks-offering," he said.
"Wash saved the hay. You'll pardon my urgency
last week."

The girl turned resentful eyes to him and put her hands quickly behind her, but did not speak.

"Come, now," he banteringly called, still holding out the flowers, "I've never seen you with a bunch like this in your arms."

They gazed deep into each other's souls, and her glance changed from resentment to challenge. She impulsively took the blossoms, folded them to her breast the way women have, buried her face caressingly in their fragrance, and shyly turned to the door. As she entered, she stopped to look back. He caught the white of her rounded neck, the scarlet of her parted lips, and a flash in her eyes that sent his heart to his throat. For once, the man's lids drooped.

CHAPTER VIII

BUT HE GAVE ME NO ANSWER

NOT long after hay harvest, the sheriff rode past the now deserted feeding-sheds and up the rise to Casa Grande. The sun was near to setting, and the air, cooling after a hot day, was clear and fragrant. Mourning doves were wailing the departing light and cock-quails clamorously gathered the early broods to their roosting. The horseman now and then, with a suggestion of perplexity, ran his fingers through thick, straight hair, lifting it to the breeze, or braced himself erectly in the saddle, the slight droop of his rugged figure not wholly due to fatigue.

Bailey for weeks had been disquieted by the master of Casa Grande's increasing attentions to the Clarks. The bailing of the family, the building of their new cabin, even the bunch of azaleas carried by Miller to

the girl—insignificant, perhaps, considered singly—were courtesies that gathered meaning by their recurrence.

When the ranchero first took possession of the Aguas Frias grant the resentment of the settlers, including Belle and her family, was so evident that the land-owner was in danger of personal violence. This relationship had been maintained until legal proceedings were begun to eject the squatters, and then the attitude of all parties suddenly became covert.

It was months, therefore, after Bailey first met Miller before the ranchero had given any sign of interest in the girl, or in her family. Even as it was, his regard appeared to be prompted by inbred chivalry rather than by personal attraction, making it the more difficult to criticise.

And the girl herself—her incomprehensible ways— There was reason for uneasiness, almost for despair; but Bailey was not of the temper to yield till the last word had been spoken. He realised, too, that Belle had given him, as yet, no right to claim her affections for his own. She had been his willing

friend, his ready comrade, but beyond that she never had encouraged him.

An irresistible attraction impelled him to visit the place of his coveted rose-garden, and the man dwelling next to it. This evening had been taken from the rush of a political canvass to put an end to the suspense he no longer could endure—to learn if, for him, she were a garden forever inclosed.

When the meal was over, host and guest lingered after the men had withdrawn. Bailey smoked abstractedly, leaning on the table. Miller, luxuriating in the pleasures of companionship, thought of nothing in particular, and filled up the silence by stroking Gyp, perched beside him on the bench.

The visitor evidently had been observing the host, for the moody man abruptly remarked: "If I were as fond of pets as you are, I'd get a wife." The subject uppermost in his mind was broached at last.

"Matrimony has its advantages," solemnly confessed the ranchero. "But," he added, with a twinkle in his eyes, "dogs, and horses, and cows are easier to find."

"Oh, I'm not trying to interfere, but I've been

thinking that some woman is missing a good home
—and a better husband."

"Have you anybody in mind?" asked Miller, a
note of banter still in his tone.

"No, John, none of my women. Something fine
—thoroughbred—like yourself."

Miller, too, leaned on the table and gazed steadfastly at his guest, then quietly asked: "What is thoroughbred?"

The guest looked up doubtfully, and Miller proceeded to answer his own question. "It's the doing. To do a thing counts as much as pedigree—more! Think of all the pedigreed flunkers; worse than scrubs! The most obscure mare that can run the pace may not become thoroughbred by her performances, but she may become the dam of thoroughbreds."

The speaker paused and smiled. His voice had lifted, the ring in it telling that he had deeply considered what qualities make thoroughbred.

Bailey straightened irritably and shook his head. Some things in his friend's philosophy were beyond understanding. He, who had been poor and obscure

all his life, failed to appreciate how any one could thus ignore the transcendent advantages of breeding. He had not yet discovered that obscure blood makes the very existence of the thoroughbred possible; the name describing a quality of nerve and mind, rather than of bone and muscle.

One thing, however, he did believe—he felt it in his aching heart—that Miller, when stating his theory of success, had Belle in his fancy. She was the obscure blood, and, had she the opportunity, could make the winning pace. A question might test his opinion.

"Would you, then, marry a woman of obscure blood, as you call it?"

Miller looked down at Gyp and dropped a caressing hand on her. When he looked up he frankly met the gaze of the other man, and his lips expressed amusement. "I don't know. Why shouldn't I? Men have done stranger things."

"And take her among your friends, to your family—with her speech, her dress, her manners?"

Miller leaned comfortably back, and asked what would be the speech of such a woman transported

[REDACTED] [REDACTED]

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from the heart of the backwoods to the lap of civilisation.

Bailey laughed incredulously, and remarked that he thought the ranchero knew.

"What would you do," was the quick reply, "if you were to be set down in Boston to-morrow? Would you be very conspicuous?"

The sheriff gazed silently at the dog. The question evidently had started a new train of thought.

"If my theory is right," continued Miller, "she'll act like people she finds herself among. Her speech, dress and manner will be copied from her surroundings. That's the thoroughbred in her."

Bailey looked up interestedly, and asked if his host thought it would be fair to the woman.

"That would depend on the woman."

The questioner had one more condition to urge. "Suppose she had the prospect of a good home with her own kind; then would it be fair?"

Miller had indifferently followed the trend of his guest's inquiries, but their object was clearer now, and this last question called for a definite answer.

"You're speaking," he replied, "of an engagement —a betrothal. In that case it wouldn't be fair. At best, it wouldn't be profitable."

"No, I'm not speaking of an engagement."

"Then it would depend on the man."

The sheriff frowned uncomprehendingly.

Miller smiled easily, and explained that happiness is not the winning of a great love, but the keeping of it.

Bailey swung round, his back to the table, his elbows resting on it, and lightly answered that love can easily be held if once won.

The ranchero leaned forward and drummed on the boards with his fingers. "I'm afraid of that theory, Bailey."

The sheriff turned his face questioningly over his shoulder.

"Love is like a gushing spring," continued Miller; "it feeds on what it yields. The sun lifts vapours from the ocean; the wind drives them inland; the cold pours them down; and the springs drink of them, and then give them up to the rivers, that flow back to the ocean."

The sheriff was not listening. His fancy went back to the desert mountains crossed by the overland route he had followed to the coast. No rain fell on those verdureless wastes, and no springs gushed out of them. He suddenly looked up at his host and said, "Well?"

Miller smiled pleasantly, and finished his comparison by adding: "I seriously question the wisdom of any man's accepting a deep love unless he is prepared to give as deep love in return."

Bailey swung round toward the speaker and regarded him apprehensively, as if there were a personal meaning in the last speech. He was reassured by his host's serenity, and indolently exclaimed, as he sprawled on the table: "You make this too solemn. It isn't worth the trouble! What's in the doing, anyway?"

The master of Casa Grande laughed indulgently, and said: "Aren't great love, great energy, great patience, great cheerfulness, the mothering of capable men and tender women, all in the doing? Aren't they worth while?"

"But," persisted Bailey, reverting to the begin-

ning of the discussion, "aren't there plenty of thoroughbreds that can do things?"

The host appeared doubtful what to answer. He ventured the opinion, however, that people who can do things are like gold mines—hard to find. They must be taken where found.

Bailey rose stiffly, and shook himself as if to throw off the doubts suggested by his host's theories. The suspense that rode in with him at sunset had been neither added to nor lessened. Miller had spoken impersonally, as if he were stating a truth of life, far-reaching in its application, but intended for no special case. The visitor took down his hat, and the two men, with a lighted lantern, went out together.

At the stable the departing guest explained, in reply to the ranchero's final protest against leaving Casa Grande at so late an hour, that he expected to stay all night with the Clarks. "Haven't seen my girl for two weeks," he added. There was an attempt at lightness in the remark, but the speaker's manner belied his tone.

The sheriff turned his horse's head to the road,

but wheeled and came back. "You know what I'm going for, Miller." He spoke abruptly, and before the ranchero had time to gather his wits Bailey answered himself: "I love Belle and want her for my wife. Are you after her, too?"

Miller laid his hand on the pommel of Bailey's saddle, looked up at the figure of the rider, looming big in the dark, and frankly replied: "You've spoken like a man, Sam. I can't answer your question, because I've never put it to myself. One thing, though, I can say: I'll be no woman's alternative! I must stand alone in her affection."

Once again the sheriff was baffled, and silently rode toward Dry Creek.

Belle, when Bailey walked into the yard, was half reclining on the edge of the porch, her hands clasped behind her head, her eyes dreamily fixed in the direction of Casa Grande. She was expecting no caller at that hour, and if she thought about it at all, she supposed it was one of her brothers. The man halted as he caught sight of her, his throat tightening. His hesitation roused the girl.

"Sam!" she exclaimed. That was all. But her

fingers, just for a happy moment, lay warm and glad in his.

He sat down, but she urged him to go in, as her mother would like to see him.

"In a minute," he protested. "I want to talk to you. Plenty of time to see your mother. I'm going to stay to-night."

Belle wanted to know if he had had supper, and when he explained that he had eaten at Casa Grande she tartly suggested that he would better go back for his lodging.

The caller was pleased with this touch of asperity, since it held a trace of jealousy. He laughed contentedly, and remarked that he preferred present company.

"Put up your horse, then," she said, and together they went to the stable.

Bailey walked close to the girl. There must have been desperation in the sweep of her skirt, for he could wait no longer on fate. He reached softly for her hand; with a nice tact she avoided his clasp. Where the path narrowed they came closer, and he sought to slip his arm in the hollow

of her waist. She gently forced his hand to her side.

It was a new game they were playing—a pantomime in the dark, but glaringly eloquent. Their hearts were painfully throbbing, his with unspoken desire, hers with a new distress. A month ago she would have told him to quit, and had he persisted she could unmistakably have emphasised her meaning. Now something fine and sweet, that budded only yesterday, kept her from speaking, but endowed her body with a gracious language.

While the man did not understand all her meaning, he caught sufficient to restrain him, and he walked back with her as silent as he was unhappy. At the gate his caution left him and he grasped her wrists. She met his gaze steadfastly and waited for him to speak.

“It’s Miller!” he breathed, at last, bursting with his own perplexities.

She twisted her wrists in his clasp, but he held on firmly. “Let’s go in.” The gladness and welcome had gone from her voice.

Even then he did not realise, but took her dumb-

ness as an admission of his charge, and he exclaimed: "You've pretended all along to hate him!"

She wrenched herself free, and unconsciously brushed her fingers over where he had gripped her, as if his touch had soiled. When she had somewhat controlled the heaving of her breast, she replied, her voice still shaking:

"I've never known him to do a cowardly thing!"

Her quietness made the emphasis she had thrown on "him" show the man beside her what he had been guilty of. It flashed on him how justly she had spoken, how brutal he must appear to her, and he dismally confessed:

"You're right—I didn't know. But you've been in my thoughts for weeks, months—slipping, slipping away. Now I've lost you. I'm not fit to be here! Good-bye, Belle—sweetheart!"

She impulsively clung to him. "Don't go tonight. Wait till morning. I've been hasty—harsh. Won't you come in?"

"No, girl. Let me go. The pity of it is, you are right; I know you're right!"

"I can't let you go this way, Sam. Wait till to-

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morrow. We'll both see our duty clearer in the daylight—after a night's rest."

He yielded, unconscious that her spirit usually dominated his—wherein lay her advantage. Therein also lay her danger. She was undeveloped as yet, but when she should be tried in the heat of life's endeavour she would prove to be immeasurably his superior. Between now and then, in the callowness of inexperience, she most likely would choose a man who could be dominated, rather than one who would dominate.

A joyless group gathered in the little cabin, waiting for bedtime. Bailey was struggling to readjust himself. He long had felt that the girl was growing away from him, but when he had been able to put aside feeling reason assured him that she could do no better than marry him. The question of adaptability had not challenged him. He had taken it as a matter of course, for his soul was not clamorous. Now, however, he had wakened to the reality, and life was standing still. The coveted rose-garden was neither for him nor for her neighbour.

Mrs. Clark studiously observed the two young

people. For some time she had regretted the change in Belle's manner toward Bailey, and she easily divined the cause. There was no doubt of the sheriff. He was one of them, and he had made no secret of his regard. But the other man—with the air and tastes of a gentleman—what were his intentions? She could not reason it out, but her traditions, her intuitions, warned her from his familiarities.

And yet a half-formed thought persisted in her dreaming fancies. What if he should make Belle his wife! The possibilities, the delight, were beyond imagining. Such unions had been known—even in her humble circle—and why not Belle? Great as was her maternal pride, it had some justification in the girl's graces, her resoluteness and her sweetness. All night long the mother dreamed of it.

Next morning was an auspicious dawning of bird-songs and balmy odours and flooding sunlight. The young people were self-possessed and apparently merry again, alert to avoid any reference to the happenings of last night—even Miller's name being carefully ignored.

Wash came late to breakfast. He had ridden to

Casa Grande with the message that a cow had calved outside the wall near their place. As soon as there came an opening in the somewhat flippant talk, the matter that Bailey and Belle had tried all morning to avoid was introduced by Wash.

The subject of most interest to the boy was the man he admired above all others and that man's doings; so Bailey was told of the attack on the Indian harvesters. His mother twisted it into a different story. Then Bailey repeated what he had heard, and all laughed at the numerous contradictions.

The visitor tilted back his chair and said, good-humouredly: "We haven't yet heard the true story. The settlers don't tell it, and Miller won't."

"No, Miller won't," echoed Mrs. Clark. "If it hadn't been for fear of his money they'd have broken him in two!"

"Who told you that?" demanded Belle, with unnecessary warmth.

"Good enough authority," evasively replied her mother.

The girl laughed genially. "I'll tell you what he

did. Single-handed, he whipped six of them out of the field."

"How do you know?" severely questioned her mother, pushing back from the table.

The answer came deliberately. "I stood on the hill this side of the big house and saw the affair from beginning to end. Talk about his being afraid! It's childish. He's a match for all of us—any time—day or night."

They looked at her in surprise as she rose from the table and flung back the heavy coil of hair, but no one challenged her.

"I wish I could have heard what they said," she continued, "but I was only close enough just to cover his heart with the sight of my rifle."

"Why didn't you shoot?" banteringly asked Bailey.

She laughed again, with a shrug of such utter unconcern that the sheriff smiled. She said that if she had shot there would be no one to hate, and it is very convenient to make some one the butt of bad temper. She said it quite cheerfully.

The speech nettled Bailey—the words, her man-

ner, her tone, he could not say which, perhaps all combined—and he abruptly bade them good-bye. Belle went with him to the stable and waited to see him off. When his horse was saddled he held out his hand to her. They had been a long time silent.

“Good-bye,” he said. “You’ll not see me soon.”

She let her hand lie in his, and dejectedly replied: “You mustn’t desert me, Sam, my only friend—the one who understands me.”

“What’s the use? You don’t care.”

“I do. As much as for any one.”

“It must be more than any one. Say it, sweetheart,” he coaxed, as he put his arm about her.

She yielded to the pressure, but her eyes regarded him wistfully, and she slowly shook her head.

“Good-bye,” he repeated, and swiftly bent to kiss her; his lips fell on her colourless cheek.

He flung himself into his saddle and went straight to the road, across the bed of the creek, now dry, and up the grade beyond, never once looking back.

The girl remained where he had left her, and gazed after him, with drooping arms and hands clasped hopelessly.

CHAPTER IX

I RAISED THEE UP

THE cow that Wash had seen in Dry Creek was one of the most valuable of Miller's herd, and the ranchero himself rode out to fetch her home.

The year before, she had wandered to the same place, and her owner now had little trouble in finding her and the calf at her side, milk-white, with a few red splotches, in shape a miniature of the cow. As the man walked toward them the youngster stood with tail straight out, and gazed big-eyed at this strange animal approaching without protest from its dam. It was still too wobbly to drive down hill, so Miller picked it up and carried it from the rocky nest where he had found it.

Near the bottom of the decline they met Belle with a rifle. She was clad in the half-Indian costume, with a slash of red here and there, that Bailey had

admired. The man with the calf in his arms beheld the girl with pleasure, and had it not been for the bridle lines of the horse he was leading he would have fallen when he stumbled.

"Careful, Mr. Miller," she exclaimed.

He set down his burden and wiped the sweat from his face, his eyes twinkling as he asked, "Are you punning?"

She frowned slightly, not comprehending.

"I didn't understand if you said 'careful' or 'calf-full.'"

"Mr. Miller!" She spoke the words with a falling accent, but her eyes caught the twinkle in his. "I didn't know that men said such things—only boys and girls, I thought."

He contentedly fanned himself with his hat, a figure good to look at, clad roughly, but appropriately—dark-blue from hat to foot, excepting black top-boots, and a red silk kerchief knotted with studied care about his throat. There must have been a lurking consciousness in the minds of both that their personal appearances this morning were not entirely a matter of chance.

At any rate, he was glad to see the friendly smile on her face, although she had spoken deprecatingly of his attempt to make her a punster, and he good-humouredly admitted that he still was something of a kid.

She looked approvingly at him, then at the calf, and remarked that he had carried this cow's calf last year the same way.

Her speech was unconscious, but it disclosed that she had observed him and his doings long before she had given any sign of interest. She must have caught the feeling in his glance, for her lids drooped, and she shouldered her rifle.

They sauntered behind the slow-going calf and its anxious dam and led the horse. Belle opened the gate in the stone wall and went a little way with them along the trail to Casa Grande. She proved a gentle herder, very patient with the halting calf, and wise in animals' ways. He wanted her to go on with them, but she had her own task, and struck off across the intervening hills.

She wound among the shady oaks, and seemed to glide across the velvet turf ablaze with wildflowers.

As long as she was in sight his gaze admiringly followed her. Never before had he beheld so lithe and supple a tread. Diana might have walked like her, perhaps looked like her, had the girl carried bow and arrows instead of rifle.

A muffled bawling in a nearby thicket rudely brought him back to earth. Some beast must be after his cattle, and he mounted and galloped to where the sound came from. In a manzanita grove up the hillside lay a yearling steer under the claws of a grizzly bear. In front of the bear, and out of his reach, stood a young bull, the most promising son of Mad Anthony—Cinnabar, they had named him—a bloody gash in the shoulder telling of his spirit. The grizzly also bore marks of battle—one of his eyes swollen shut. He must have been tearing the throat of the steer when the bull unawares charged and struck him. Cinnabar's horns were too short to inflict serious damage, although his compact frame and swelling neck could deal a fearful blow.

The bull was too young to fight for the lust of combat, as did his sire, and the blood slowly drip-

ping from the gash was evidence of its painfulness. Yet he stood lashing his ribs with his tail, pawed the dust in defiance, and cautiously awaited an opening to strike again. The bear, fearful of another blow, crouched over the steer and growled savagely.

Miller was without arms or weapons, save his heavy coiled riata. The steer was hurt beyond mending, and the man's care now was to get Cinnabar away from danger. He rode close to the combatants, his mount almost unmanageable from fear of the bear, and brought down the rawhide rope on the bull, which immediately charged at the horse and drove him into the brush.

The ranchero returned to the rescue, this time more warily. Before he could spur the trembling horse close enough to swing again at the bull, the cow, which had been left in the hollow below, attracted by the bellowing of the wounded steer, dashed excitedly through the undergrowth, struck the bear in the back and hurled him headlong. As she wheeled to strike again, the bawling of her offspring, left alone in an unfamiliar spot, fell on her ears, and, instead of charging the bear, she galloped

past Miller and disappeared in the direction she had entered.

The grizzly, furious with rage and pain, regained his footing in time to see the cow pass Miller. The brute's fighting blood was stirred, and he plunged after her. Miller, now between the two, wheeled and fled, the bear following. The rider kept easily out of reach and led the pursuer toward Casa Grande, where he was sure of Manuel and his rifle.

The ranchero held his mount as close as he dared to the grizzly, for fear the brute would return to his unfinished dinner and the young bull. Pursuer and pursued kept steadily on their way, the horse turning his head first to one side and then the other, timidly watchful. The bear lumbered awkwardly over the ground, but with surprising swiftness.

They had reached the level of the valley, and Miller guided the horse to skirt the base of the hill. Both were watching the bear more closely than they noticed the trail, as he now was running easier. A dry water course lay ahead, and before the horse observed it he made a false step and fell.

Miller was stunned for an instant; then, like a flash, he realised his danger and tried to rise. The terrible pain in his leg warned him that something was wrong. Pull and twist as he would, he could not withdraw his foot from under the horse, which he struck a stinging blow with the riata; the animal tried to get up, but could not. It lay with feet up the rising ground, and its plunging and straining served only to move its body farther on the rider's leg and the more securely pin him down.

It was of no use. The grizzly saw the plight of the fugitives and came swifter; the man could hear the swish of claws cutting into the turf. The thought that, after all his dangers, he must die like some wild thing torn by a fierce beast, bitterly smote him, but he lay back quickly, his face turned from the sullen brute, now almost on him. He seemed to catch the quick breathing of the bear; he thought each oncoming footprint the last, and his nerves were tensely keyed for the final plunge, the cruel teeth.

What sound was that? A crack had rent the air—then silence, as if nature itself stopped to listen. Could it have been a rifle shot? Miller painfully

turned. Not ten feet away lay the bear, dead. The man twisted his body to gaze behind him, up the hill. Her moccasined tread was too light to be heard, but he caught the flutter of her skirt. And then she was at his side, her gun ready if the grizzly moved. The thick folds of her blue waist failed to conceal the heaving of her breast, and in her glance were concern and relief.

"I knew it was you!" he exclaimed, ineffectually pulling to free his leg. "One more nail to crucify me with."

She waited before she replied, her eyes frankly turned to his. "No, I don't care enough to crucify you. But I'll help you up." She laid the rifle on the ground and caught the horse by the bit.

"Easy, Belle," he called, as the animal began to plunge.

"Your leg's broken!" she cried.

"No, I think not—I hope not." Again he tried to move. "His whole weight seems to be on my foot, though. Will you fasten him so he can't plunge?"

She deftly bound the riata about the horse's legs,

and when finished he was as securely tied as any vaquero could fasten him. "Now I'll have to pry him off. And not a stick in sight." She picked up her rifle and drew out the load, shoved the long, heavy barrel under the horse's flank and pulled up on the stock. The weight lifted a little from Miller's leg.

"That's good. Try once more."

Again and again she pried. His heavy boot appeared to catch in the animal's ribs, preventing the man from drawing it clear. Once more she pushed the barrel under the horse; one more lift, and, with a twist and a snap, the cramped leg was withdrawn.

"There goes my rifle!" She regretfully held up the broken stock.

"Never mind. There are half a dozen on the wall in my room. Take your choice."

She slowly shook her head, and told him that it had been her father's trusted weapon. There wasn't its equal in the county.

He sat near the quiet horse, rubbed his freed leg, and smiled at this trace of fetishism. "Give it to me, then; I'll have a new stock put on it."

"We're under enough obligations," she answered, with a touch of bitterness.

"Not after to-day. The crack of your rifle changed all that."

"Pooh!" she exclaimed, in some confusion. "Because I shot the bear? For all we know, he would have been satisfied with the horse, especially if you had kept still."

"Any way you please, Belle. Just the same, the debt can be repaid only one way. A life for a life, you know."

"Let's call it quits, then. The world is wide enough for both of us." She paused as if considering what to say next. "You are good and kind, in a way. But I never can forgive your taking our home!"

"I offered to sell the land," he argued.

She still insisted that the land was not his to sell; that the Government had done wrong in deciding against them; that he was broad and liberal enough to have righted the wrong.

"If we had been in your class, you'd have made us a deed, and said nothing about pay."

He gazed curiously at her, to divine, if possible, the exact purport of the rebuke, but her face was placid. "Do you think the women of my class barter affections for houses and lands?"

She answered that she wasn't thinking at all of affections, but of rights.

"Then you think my sense of justice runs to classes?" His tone expressed amusement.

She bent over, picked up the barrel of her rifle and fitted the broken parts together, but did not answer.

"I'll not defend my actions," he said, with a sigh. "I thought I was doing right—I still think so." He absently threw a handful of earth on the motionless horse beside him. "You'll have to take me as you find me, Belle—very human, with no sign of wings. For which I'm thankful, as I want to live."

The man's self-forgetfulness moved her. She knew that he was in pain, but not a word betrayed it. She knew he needed help, but rather than ask it he would suffer. Her old resentment gave way for a time and she offered to help him up.

He shook his head, but the light of comradeship was in his eyes. He rose stiffly, took the rifle-barrel

from her and leaned on it. "No bones broken," he said, as he painfully twisted his foot. "Now we must get the horse up." He limped a step or two, but his evident distress made it plain that he could not walk.

She took the loose end of the riata that bound the animal, stood beside him, and pulled with all her strength; over he rolled, his feet now lower than his body, and as soon as untied he sprang nimbly up and snorted at the dead bear.

"He fared better than you," she observed, as she led the steed to the cripple and helped him mount.

Miller eased himself in the saddle and imperiously held out his hand. "Now give me your rifle—barrel and stock."

She picked up the broken parts, but did not offer them to him. The note of command in his voice nettled her, for it expressed superiority. Instead, it was prompted by a feeling of comradeship, which had grown rapidly since her return from jail; and had he not just passed through so severe an ordeal his tones would have been less harsh.

"Please," he gently urged, as she turned away.

"Good-bye," she answered, and walked stiffly toward Dry Creek.

He looked after her with surprise; then resentment; then regret. The past weeks he had been picturing her as sweet and fine, but she was hard and coarse. She must know that she had placed him under a lasting obligation, and she scorned his slightest expression of gratitude. He had not yet learned that the very intensity of her emotions often made her cloak them under an assumed rudeness.

With a sense of depression he turned toward Casa Grande. And yet Belle, in his direst need, had been gentle and resolute. The memory of all she just had done shamed him, and he impulsively came back.

"You can't dismiss me with good-byes," he said, when he overtook her.

She smilingly extended her hand. "The sooner you go home, the better for your leg."

"That's good medicine," he admitted, as he clasped her fingers. "I'll be all right in a day or two."

Once more they parted—this time the gladness of life throbbing in their veins.

CHAPTER X

BY THE FOOTSTEPS OF THE FLOCK

IT was September weather, and the hills were yellowing under a burning sun. Buckeye and maple mixed orange and crimson in their foliage, and clumps of poison-oak glowed ember-like. Dead leaves were everywhere, and they must frequently be cleaned from the wooden troughs that led water out of the Aguas Frias to Casa Grande.

Nearly two months after the injury to Miller's leg he walked up the creek to look after his water supply, now at its lowest. He was armed with only a shovel, and even that had so far proved unnecessary. His mind was serene as the weather, the days having brought few irritations, with the warfare of the squatters seemingly at a truce. He hoped he at last had worn out their resentment; he knew he had tried hard enough.

As he stood on the bank of the shaded stream, lost in day-dreams, a stone rattled down at his feet. Above him, on the crest of the ravine, he beheld some young cattle browsing, and in idle curiosity climbed to them. When he reached the top he gazed with pleasure at the well-fed animals, the uniformity of their reds and whites. Some distance away Mad Anthony Wayne was industriously cropping the grass, whisking flies with his slender tail, and paternally observant of all about him. As the master of the ranch climbed into view the roan intently regarded him, then went on feeding, quite satisfied.

The indifferent attitude of the bull did not long continue, however. He alertly threw up his head and gazed toward the east, his ears pricked in the same direction, his breath, as he took the wind, drawn with slow, deep sniffing. He had detected something beyond the reach of Miller's duller perceptions, and moved expectantly forward.

The ranchero followed, out of curiosity, and presently caught the low bellowing of an approaching bull. At first he concluded that it must be one of his younger animals, already lustng in the sound

of their own voices, but as the man heard the full measure of the challenge he decided that a stranger was invading the range from the direction of Dry Creek.

The black bull of the squatters was first in his mind, the big, active, long-horned scrub, which had watchfully been kept away from his own herd for more than a year. Now that the invader had passed the barrier and was tramping forbidden soil, what was to be done?

Miller ran ahead of Mad Anthony and tried, with a flourish of the shovel, to turn him back toward Casa Grande, where the vaqueros might be summoned to drive the strange bull off and prevent the threatened combat. But the big roan was in no humour to be turned by a man on foot; much as he loved his master, he loved the prospect of a battle more, snorted defiantly, and shook his head in warning.

Miller now decided to drive away the black bull, fast approaching, and ran waving his shovel at the challenger. The intruder was more dangerous than Mad Anthony and quite as eager to fight. The man

hurled a stone at him. It struck his arching ribs and bounded into the air, but the blow only maddened him, and he charged on Miller and drove him to an oak.

The horned warriors were fast coming together, when Belle galloped swiftly after the invader. She was mounted on a pony full of life and intelligence, alert to every motion of the rider's body. He ran with head lifted high and shining eyes and flowing mane; she sat him joyously, horse and girl a picture of nomadic freedom. A riata, looped for throwing, was in her hand, and her face was glowing from the chase.

The ranchero feared lest she might lasso the black. If she did, the roan would surely kill him, which must bring trouble on all of them. He jumped from his perch in the oak and waved his hat at her.

"Keep away!" he cried.

She drew rein in sudden confusion, and her first thought was that he might blame her for permitting the intruder to come on the ranch. "He got through the flood-gate across the creek," she said. "I didn't know he was in till I heard him bellow."



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Miller caught the defensive note in her voice, and kindly urged her to keep away from the bulls. It was too late to interfere; the only thing now was to give each a fair field and let them fight to the end.

"But he'll kill Mad Anthony!" protested the girl.

"He'll be the first to conquer the old fellow," replied his owner, with a touch of vanity.

"Look at his horns," urged Belle. "It'll be like a man with a sword fighting a man with a knife!"

"Yes; Anthony's horns aren't much, but see that neck; isn't it magnificent!"

"Come and get on my horse," she said, lightly jumping down, with a hope that he would do something when mounted.

"No, Belle; stay in your saddle. If we interfere now, it may cost the life of the bull we bother. There they go, anyway."

The antagonists were facing each other, the roan massive, short-legged and furious, the black wild, bony and alert, with the advantage of being up the hill. What the roan gained in power the black made up in activity. The one, with short, strong horns,

depended on striking force; the other, with long, slender horns, depended on quickness of thrust. If their natural weapons had been equally formidable, the black could not match the roan. As it was, the match was not unequal.

The black bull, which had made most of the noise, grew silent. He intently watched the roan and cautiously prepared for the attack. The ranchero's heart throbbed, for the invader was a proved warrior, fighting his way down the ranges, from miles to the north, and conquering all antagonists. Mad Anthony always had been protected from fights with his kind, as he was too valuable to risk against neighbouring scrubs.

But the roan proved quite as watchful as the black, and as the antagonists paused their aspects typified animal hatred. The black slowly lowered his head till his horns stood straight forward, his small eyes glittering like gems. He pawed the dust into the air with long sweeps of sinewy legs; it fell in a fine cloud, turning his coat tawny. He snorted defiance, and as the other bull threw up his head the black arched his supple back and twisted his body

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sidewise, his eyes rolling, foam on his lips, ready for a savage lunge.

Mad Anthony paid no heed to these threats. He saw only the hated intruder, he heard only the defiant challenge, and he knew that his rights had been invaded. One alternative only was possible: he must continue master of the range, or leave his bones to whiten on the hills.

The roan did not paw the dust. He did not even snort. He walked straight at his foe, the flash of his glance lurid and terrible. He stopped as if to measure the distance separating them, lowered his head and, whipping his slender tail like a lash, shot forward and struck the black full in the forehead, with a noise like the crackling of a sapling. They paused a moment with locked horns, then the black cavorted sidewise as he backed away, unable to withstand the drive of the roan's mighty sinews.

In the fierce scramble to separate, the bulls had moved round the oak, so that Mad Anthony now was up the hill, the black slightly below him, and they stood glaring at each other. Again the intruder pawed the dust; again he snorted and twisted his

body, his stout black tail lashing ribs on which the sweat of battle was beginning to glisten. He moved uneasily before his opponent; he had met a foe that would try him to the death. He wanted to avoid a charge head on; the enemy was too powerful a striker. He must play for the other's ribs; the long, slender horns must decide the battle. If he could dodge the roan sufficiently to catch his flank, then would be the opportunity to strike the blow that more than once had left him master, the crimson insignia of victory on his tapering horns.

Mad Anthony likewise was a diplomat, and knew a thing or two about fighting, never turning his eyes from his antagonist. He appreciated that this battle hung on striking force. He knew the uselessness of his short horns, watched for an opening, and more cautiously than before he faced the black.

The other bull, step by step, had backed down the hill until he could feel the oak behind him with his switching tail, and there he stood. Both heads were lowered again; again Mad Anthony's tail shot out; again he hurled himself at the black and struck him full between the horns. The sable mass recoiled



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against the tree, and above the crash of meeting skulls could be heard the sharper crack of breaking bones. When the dust lifted, Mad Anthony proudly shook his head above the enemy, which, limp and motionless, lay dead, his ebon head upturned, his neck broken.

Miller cautiously approached the bulls and Belle rode nearer. There was a fire in Mad Anthony's eyes, a nervous switching of the tail, that showed him still unsafe.

"Old man," said the ranchero, glancing at his favourite, "you slaughtered him like the warrior you are, but the devil will be to pay for this with the squatters!"

The bull only tossed his head, and walked from under the shadow of the tree. He looked down into the valley of the Casa Grande, and, raising his voice in three mellow bugle notes of victory, strode back to his own.

The young cattle had been curiously gathering about the fighters, and when the monarch of them all turned away some walked up and sniffed at the dead warrior. They could not know of death, yet

a wild frenzy seized them, and they fell to bellowing and pawing the earth and leaping and hooking at one another.

Miller and Belle were still under the tree, and to remain longer would be dangerous. The man turned to the girl and kindly said: "Now, go while it's safe. These brutes are growing frantic."

"What will you do?" she asked, sitting quite immovable.

"Climb back into the tree. Go quick."

She moved her horse close, withdrew a foot from the near stirrup and said, as frankly as if a man: "Climb up; Buck will carry double."

He shook his head half-doubtfully, something swelling in his throat. She was a comrade to be trusted in any emergency, without a thought of her own danger. A more frantic commotion than usual among the cattle rapidly gathering decided him, and he vaulted to the seat behind her.

They galloped in silence to the crest of the ravine of the Aguas Frias. Her supple, boyish figure oppressed him as she lightly swayed to the horse's motion. Loose strands of hair floated in his face, and

[REDACTED]

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her breath carried a nameless perfume. The lump in his throat filled tighter as he thought of her restless soul, her tireless humanity, her unfaltering courage. What might she not make of herself with opportunity! As she drew rein and glanced happily at him, he felt that, after all, she could become as fine as the woman of her own ideals.

He dismounted and stood beside her, a hand on the horn of her saddle. The curves in her lips told that she expected no thanks other than comradeship. It was not sufficient for him, however, and he quietly said:

"I'm beginning to consider you my protecting angel."

"You mustn't," she hurriedly replied. "I'd do for any man what I've done for you. Good-bye."

She wheeled and sped away to Dry Creek. He watched her to the crest of the hill. As she plunged out of sight, she cast a swift glance backward.

CHAPTER XI

UNTIL THE SHADOWS FLEE AWAY

NOT many days after the black bull of the squat-
ters had fought his last fight one of Miller's
vaqueros, riding leisurely along the trail in the direc-
tion of Dry Creek, noticed the circling flight of buzzards.
He knew what their presence meant, and
soon found Mad Anthony's dead body, a bullet
wound behind the shoulder.

The man spurred back to the dwelling, a fleet mes-
senger of death. With an echoing clatter of hoofs,
he galloped into the stone-paved courtyard and rang
an alarm from the watch tower. A dog ran out of
the kitchen and howled.

It was the first time the old bell had sounded an
alarm for them, but the beat of the fluttering tongue
re-echoed a dirge from the sloping hills. The men
galloped up with sombre faces and eyes aglow, their
ponies snorting in fear.

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A sled and team bore the dead hero to the shadow of the fig-trees that grew between the house and the creek. The leafy grove had been his accustomed protection from noontide heat; henceforth it would be the eternal resting-place of his dust.

They did not realise what a dominant life he had led until death rode him down. They did not know what space in human regard a dumb brute can fill until his going had left the void. They would not admit their pride in him until he was driven in for the final rodeo.

He could have been no more sincerely mourned had he been one of their kind, and for days the old house was desperately gloomy. Miller forgave the treachery that had killed their favourite, but his vaqueros were less impersonal, and he feared they might forget that the injunction, a life for a life, applies only to men. He took the precaution, therefore, to have them leave their weapons behind when they rode the range.

It was a welcome relief when Bailey came to dine with them a week after Mad Anthony's funeral. He had heard of the bull's death, and he feared the re-

sult. He needed to ask few questions when the subject was discussed, and by the time the meal was over no doubt remained in his mind how the inmates of Casa Grande felt.

The guest lingered at the table to hear what Miller would say. The master of the range was less communicative than his men, and an air of oppression kept him unusually silent.

"I hope," said Bailey, "that you're not going to retaliate."

"Oh, no. I'm too busy restraining my men. You'll notice that they ride without arms."

"It's curious that the squatters should have held your bull answerable for killing theirs."

Miller gloomily replied that it was not the bull they were after, but his master.

Bailey asked if the master had been doing anything worse than usual.

Miller reluctantly admitted that he had prevented their exchanging calves on one of his best cows.

Bailey was alert at once, and wanted to know how Miller had prevented the exchange.

[REDACTED]

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"I came on the man as he was about to brand my calf, and I warned him not to."

"Warned him! Pull a gun on him?"

"No. I told him it was my calf."

"What did he say?"

Miller smiled a little. "He told me I lied."

"Pull your gun then?"

"It would have been one against twenty if I had."

"What did you do, then?"

"I urged him to think about it—to wait till next day."

"A hell of a proposition!" exclaimed Bailey, noisily laughing.

Miller did not smile. He said, however, that the calf came back, unbranded, to the range. But he would rather have lost a hundred calves than Mad Anthony.

"Was their bull on your range when he got killed?"

"Yes. He came hunting trouble."

"Did any of them see the fight?"

Miller hesitated. He regretted to drag Belle into the discussion, but it was better that Bailey should

have the story at first hand, and the ranchero evenly answered :

"Belle Clark was there."

Bailey keenly regarded his host. The answer had been given frankly, yet this was his first intimation of the girl's presence on the scene. "What was she doing there?" The sheriff asked the question curtly.

Just as evenly as before came the answer: "She was after the black bull."

Bailey rose and paced the floor a turn or two. "Do you think it's fair, Miller? Here she is watching bull-fights with you. The other day she shot a grizzly chasing you and got your horse off your leg. Where will it end?"

The master of Aguas Fria's felt his pulse quicken at the insinuation, but he looked charitably at Belle's self-constituted champion, and asked, with a twinkle in his eye:

"Shall I forbid her the range?"

Bailey threw himself on the bench beside the table, and rather moodily answered: "I suppose I'm interfering." He remained silently studying the floor, and at length observed: "She's a good girl."

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Miller did not answer. His guest's remark implied that the ranchero's influence might be questionable. It was a matter too personal for present discussion, and especially since his own conscience was clear. Bailey, exasperated by the host's poise, rose to go, and asked, as he reached for his hat: "Was Belle at the rodeo when you warned the squatter not to brand your calf?"

"No. But I saw her that day. I'm always glad to see her."

"I'm sure of that without your telling."

"You mustn't grudge the few enjoyments of my range life, Bailey; especially as your own visits to her have been rather far between of late."

The sheriff looked hard at the ranchero. He was disposed to resent this criticism, but he quickly remembered that he had spoken quite frankly of Miller's doings, and his host had set him an example in courtesy. The visitor replied, therefore, without irritation:

"Perhaps I have been negligent. I'll go over to Dry Creek on my way back to town."

"And, Bailey," called Miller, in friendly tones,

"don't take too much for granted. Don't take anything for granted."

"Not even what I see?" demanded Bailey, with the suspicion of a smile on his face.

"That depends on how well you can see. Good-bye."

Late that afternoon Bailey returned to Casa Grande, and asked Miller to ride a little way with him on the road to town.

When the friends were jogging easily side by side, Bailey told his companion that he just had given Belle quite a lecture. "I think I made her understand she must stop chasing round after you."

"You expressed yourself somewhat forcefully, I judge."

Bailey laughed with amusement. "I didn't use just those words. But you must admit, old man, that things can't go on as they have been."

"Are you thinking of the girl, or of yourself, or of me?"

"The girl, of course," replied Bailey, nettled. He was catching a more impersonal glimpse of his own actions.

Miller smiled. "I didn't know that disinterestedness is so prominent a trait in your character."

"The devil you didn't!"

Miller checked Peggy and quizzically regarded his companion. "I understood that you invited me to ride, not to lecture me."

Bailey's jaw relaxed an instant, then his face lighted. "Come on. What's the use of getting mad? You know, all's fair in love and war."

"Now that I know what you consider fair," rejoined Miller, riding along again, "I'll not be so greatly shocked."

The sheriff insisted, however, that his long friendship for the family gave him a right to explain to Belle what the proprieties demand of a young girl, and he had taken no unfair advantage.

"Your purpose is kindly enough, but I mistrust your methods—to say nothing of the reflection on my motives."

"What are your motives?" Bailey asked the question rather guiltily.

Miller smiled at his companion's insistence, and answered: "As I said the other day, quite friendly."

"I've blundered again," said Bailey, and held out his hand.

"No, Sam, you've been their good friend. But don't force the girl to do consciously what so far has been prompted by merely her native impulsiveness."

The men parted, and Miller rode lightly homeward. The last whistling of larks, the mourning of doves, the quidado of quails, with the soft air and the breath of the meadows, soon brought forgetfulness of his irritation at Bailey. When he reached his own range he turned aside to the line of stone wall to see if any trespassers had come in. The sun had set and shadows were deepening as he neared the brow of the hill overlooking Dry Creek.

He had not proceeded far when he detected some animals running swiftly from the direction of the floodgate. They at first appeared like three galloping horsemen, but as he drew nearer he saw that one was his bull Cinnabar, the other two chasing the bull at top speed and flogging him with the loops of their riatas. The young animal ran as if terrified, and the skilful riders hung to his flanks and belaboured him.

[REDACTED]

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The recollection of Mad Anthony was yet too sensitive to tolerate the persecution of this other favourite, and the ranchero forgot his resolution of self-control and gave chase. Peggy knew what was wanted, and never had she run freer. The two herders separated as soon as aware of pursuit, and Miller followed the nearer one.

The ranchero was dimly conscious of something familiar in the motion of the fleeing horse and the swaying rider, but he was blinded to every impulse but resentment. He leaned to his own mount, urging her still faster, and when the fugitive fell to whipping his own steed the man in pursuit smiled grimly. It was a splendid race. Peggy clung to the stirrup of the trespasser; with ears laid back, she reached the horse's shoulder, then ran even with him, nose to nose.

Miller bent over and gathered the man beside him in his arm, and braced himself to lift the slight figure clear of the saddle. Something soft and yielding in the form made him hesitate, set his heart to pounding, and he suddenly reached with his other hand and checked his captive's horse.

They were standing at last. The quick, hard breathing of their mounts was the only sound, save the throb of Miller's heart, and it vexed him to think that the captive in his arm must feel it, too. He tried to speak evenly, but his voice quivered as he exclaimed: "What do you mean?"

The figure he clasped rested with averted face, and did not answer, except the trembling of the body shrinking closer to him. As he twisted the trespasser's face, he caught the perfume of her breath, and felt, rather than heard, her long-drawn sigh.

"Belle!" he said. "How could you?"

She neither moved nor answered, but unfalteringly met his gaze.

"I wouldn't have believed it," he unhappily remarked, then loosened his hold on her and straightened in his seat.

She caught the distress in his manner and roused at last. "I meant no harm. Mr. Miller, I didn't! I didn't!" Her breath was drawn quickly.

He leaned on his hands, crossed over the pommel, his eyes downcast.

"Cinnabar has been coming to our side every day

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since the black bull was killed." She spoke impetuously, eager to justify herself. "We've driven him back regularly. To-night we were trying to scare him so he wouldn't come again. Ask Tom."

Miller turned his glance to the approaching figure, and he recognised the other horseman—her brother.

The ranchero laughed a relieved laugh and straightened his drooping shoulders. "I'm glad, Belle. Hate me, if you must; fight me, if you will—but like a man, as you've always done, not like a sneak!"

Her head bent down, and in the dim light he could tell by the movement of her shoulders that she was sobbing in spite of her effort not to. It was an unexpected thrust, and proved his undoing. He removed his hat, wiped the sweat of discomfiture from his brow, and quickly said:

"I'm ashamed of what I've just done. When you judge me, however, remember the stress I've been under the past two weeks."

She looked up shyly at him, her emotion controlled, and irrelevantly remarked, "You frightened me."

"I frightened myself when I found it was you. What shall I do with you?" They both sat musing, and then he continued: "I told Bailey that perhaps I would better forbid you the range. What do you think?"

She took up her bridle lines and settled firmly in her seat. "Sam Bailey isn't my father confessor."

The answer was not what Miller had expected, but something in her manner, a slight toss of resentment, made him laugh happily. She caught the infection and laughed with him.

"Clear out, now, both of you. If my cattle stray on you again, send me word—if you want to help me."

All the way home he could feel the pressure of her body against his arm, and he resented it. He was growing to look for her, even to seek her, and it was time to halt. He had been too long on the ranch, had thought too much of his own perplexities. It would be well to get back a little while among his own people, and that night he took down his travelling case and overhauled his wardrobe.

CHAPTER XII

'A VERY FLAME OF THE LORD

MOUNTAIN streams were rising again, and among sunburnt boulders of their lately arid beds shallow waters eddied with rippling music. The murmur of the Aguas Frias droned faintly in the old house, and the reservoir behind the barn overflowed once more, after weeks of scant supply. Through the pipes that led to the courtyard it seemed as if the melody of singing eddies were hurrying to be played in the splash of the fountain with its brimming stone basin, where water lilies were putting out new shoots, goldfish, confined through the drought in a barrel, were flashing in and out of the shadows, and birds fluttered and cooled their wings in the rainbow sprays.

The thick haze of October obscured the distant mountains. The spangled carpet of spring, now

faded to honey-colour, covered the earth with inflammable stubble. The chaparral on the hills and the growth along waterways were shedding their leaves, which the wind swept into heaps ready for ignition. The midday sun boded forest fires; a pungent odour of smoke was everywhere, and the drowsy air was haunted by a presentiment that behind the purple haze a conflagration might be smouldering.

Miller, refreshed and resolute, was back again from a two weeks' visit to San Francisco. The long drought disturbed him, and he anxiously watched the heavily timbered eastern hills. A fleecy cloud, a blue film hanging over their crests, filled his imagination with a fear that the forest might be breeding another fire, as in years past, to sweep down and destroy. Every morning he eyed the rising sun to find some sign from the rain clouds. Every night he watched the sun go down to see if the shadow of a storm might hasten the departing light. The only shadow on the sun was purple haze; the only harbinger of a storm was the wind that rushed fitfully down the hills, scattered dead leaves, and as fitfully died away.

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The anxious month had worn but half through when the dreaded summons came. A party of revellers, on their way to Santa Rosa, stopped in front of the old house an hour before midnight, and, finding their only welcome the barking of dogs, joined unsteady voices in a drinking song so persistently repeated that the sleepy inmates were forced to show themselves. When all had come outside, the real purpose of the visit was evident, for above the eastern hills flames glowed steadily, as if the big, yellow moon were climbing the wooded crests.

This beginning of the conflagration was not a formidable sight. To those who never before had watched these forest fires it seemed as if a few pails of water might extinguish it. But to the men already at the top of the hills, who were fighting to keep the flames from the woods, the battle was hopeless, and one by one they drew away, to save what they could of their homes that these forests surrounded. The blaze, like the headlight of a distant locomotive, appeared to creep on its course toward the valley—in another hour to plunge swiftly downward, with the hiss and roar of numberless trains.

Some of the men who had roused the sleepers at Casa Grande remained to help; some rode to waken other sleepers; and some continued to town and told belated stragglers of the danger that threatened the valley of the Aguas Frias. Many of these hastened to the scene of the conflagration, among them the sheriff, who was leaving the jail as the couriers arrived.

While the fire swept downward, the knot of men at Casa Grande grew larger as volunteers rode in. They fastened their horses in secure places and gathered in quiet groups to discuss former fires and how they had been fought. All knew that nothing could be done till the flames came close except watch the fiery brands that drifted down from the furnace above. It was these noiseless, blazing meteors that must be guarded against, light branches snapped from a burning giant, to float, like toy balloons, away to the fields below, and wherever they fell the tinder carpet of the earth became a river of flame running swiftly toward the valley.

The old house was fireproof. Tile roof and adobe walls gave nothing to ignite, and the dwelling was

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left by itself. The barn had been protected by placing barrels filled with water along the ridge of the roof. The great stacks at the feeding-sheds, too, had been surrounded by wide furrows, to save them from the stubble fires that might be started. Had one good shower fallen during the past two weeks these precautions would have been unnecessary.

The hot, still air of the valley lay like a stifling vapour. The fragrant breath of the night wind had expired. The echoing voices of darkness were hushed in expectancy. Slowly, stealthily, the booming flames were gathering for a mighty effort; a moment more, with a rush and a roar and a bound, they would hurl themselves into the valley.

The time for action arrived at last, and the volunteers scattered. Each member of the Casa Grande household was armed to-night, for fear of treachery. The fire would pass to the south of Dry Creek, and the squatters would therefore be free to leave their homes. There was no telling what they might do when the flames had burned down to Aguas Frias. Every pistol in the old adobe had been pressed into use, and the only firearm left to Miller was a long-

barrelled, highly finished revolver, that shot a small bullet, but carried a heavy charge of powder.

A guard was left at the barn, and the others went down to the feeding-sheds. Miller, on his mount, was everywhere. The flames on the hillsides were rolling nearer; they seemed to leap from tree to tree, to fling great sheets high up, like lurid banners; and when they fell back again the darkness would glow with mast-like outlines marking the wreck.

It was the trees that Miller mourned, as he watched the racing element embrace one after another, to leave them in ruins. They had stood god-like in their resistance of the seasons. Storms had beat upon them, the sun had scorched them, frosts had chilled them; but only their wrinkled trunks had recorded the fleeting years. They had passed unharmed through centuries, and to-night they must yield.

As the master of Aguas Frias was grieving over the loss he heard his name called, and he, shouting in answer, soon beheld, in the day-like glare, Sam Bailey riding toward him.

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"You come like the cup of cold water, old man," was his greeting.

"Your voice sounds like a funeral," Bailey replied.

"See the ruin of those splendid trees!"

"That much more firewood, Miller."

"You can't understand, Bailey."

"No, I can't. If we mourn to-night over nothing more precious than trees I shall be glad. What can I do?"

"You'll find sufficient. But keep close."

The roar of the oncoming flames was like the boom of the surf, with now and then the crash of a falling tree. The heavens reflected the light in advancing arcs of glowing radiance that paled the very stars. As the fire rushed steadily downward, the watchmen could distinguish above the muffled thunder the whirr of frightened quails, while blue-jays and woodpeckers hastened, screaming, to safer perches. Now and then a deer fled past with terrified bounds, and smaller dwellers of the woods skulked unmolested in the shadows.

The wind at last had reached down to them. The

glowing furnace of the burning woods was sucking into its mighty draught the listless atmosphere, to blow it back with a stifling shower of firebrands, driving the horsemen to and fro, like swooping eagles, to beat out the flames marking the fall of burning hail.

The fodder-sheds were surrounded by a hay-field, matted with ripened grass that had been kept for late grazing. A spark fell on it, and a blaze flashed upward. From all directions the men swiftly gathered to the help of those already fighting to save the stacks. With dripping sacks and blankets, they beat down the column of charging flames, and in the grime and dust and sweat of the fierce onslaught the devouring race of the fire was ended.

While the sooty, panting warriors stood resting after their struggles a glare spread upward in the direction of the farthest stack. They hastened there and found it burning, and, fight as they would, it gained upon them. They backed away at last, driven off by the blistering heat, and watched the great heap melt into yellow flame. It was a stirring, a depressing sight. The growth and the labour of months were flashing out in invisible gases, the subtle ele-

ments of the atmosphere, incarnate, as it were, in the cured hay, now resolving themselves back to the firmament.

The roar on the hillsides hushed. The glare of the flames faded behind the twinkle of stars. The air took on its morning chill. Like a hopeless spirit, the fire had fled down the hills and plunged with a moan into the Aguas Frias, to end its flight in the frosty waters. Some pasture and one stack had been destroyed, but no treachery had been committed.

Miller turned thankfully from the burned stack, and left a guard to protect the others, now safe unless the wind changed. He went with the band of tired fighters to the old house, where a light gleamed from the open door. The hospitable room soon was filled with a noisy, sooty, good-natured mob, all talking at once, each bragging of some more impossible feat than the others. The centre of this noisy circle was Manuel, smiling and voluble, filling tins with steaming coffee. The table was spread with the remnant of the evening meal, and after the manner of primitive men the hungry were serving themselves.

As the last neighbour rode away a thin segment of moon sailed above the smoky hills. Instead of pale yellow, it shone like burnished copper through the naked limbs of blighted trees. Deep shadows still enfolded the dwelling as the inmates, after a final sortie in the fields, were leading their tired ponies to the barn. They had not proceeded far when Gyp bounded forward, barking furiously.

"Something's wrong," remarked Miller, peering into the gloom. "She never acts this way unless there's danger."

He scarcely had finished speaking before the dog tore back, almost beside herself. "Good God!" the ranchero exclaimed, bounding to his saddle, closely followed by the others. Their hoofbeats rang on the baked earth, and suddenly from beyond the barn there came echoing hoofbeats which clattered on the stony bed of the glen. With a yell the men dashed forward, Miller and Bailey on one side, the rest on the other side. As the master of the range gained the rear of the building he saw a shadowy figure running from a blaze against the wall and melt into the darkness, a signal for the volley

that was discharged after him by the alert riders.

The fire against the barn lit up a flickering circle of gloom as it danced and crackled, but before it had eaten into the hay the men beat it out. Then they cautiously advanced into the glen, where, far up the creek, they could hear the dog bark. They found nothing, however, but silence and blackness and a chill air pungent with the odour of charred wood.

As the wornout group were leaving the barn for the house Gyp had returned and was barking from the edge of the underbrush. They walked quickly to where she stood, and there saw the prostrate body of a man.

"Aha!" exclaimed Miller. "We shot wild, but some one aimed well."

They silently gathered about the obscure figure, an indifferent crowd. Some treachery had been planned under cover of the forest fire, and, as far as they were concerned, the dead man might lie till morning, not far away, now.

"Well?" observed Bailey, breaking the silence.

"We'll take him to the house," said Miller, bending down.

They carried the limp figure out of the chill air into the warmth of the kitchen and the glow of the candles. As they passed through the door the red moon gleamed ominously. Below the gleam of the moon was a first streaking of dawn.

They crossed the room and carelessly put their burden on the floor. The jolt of falling knocked off his hat, and a loosened coil of wavy black hair tumbled in the dust.

Miller flung himself down, slipped a shaking hand under the curving shoulders and lifted the head in the hollow of his arm to the light. His gaze hung aghast on the white face, then slowly lifted to Bailey, who was staring dreadfully.

A silence fell in the room, the very dogs pausing just as they were. The sheriff knelt at last and tenderly clasped a lifeless hand in both his own. "Belle!" he murmured, and put his face caressingly on the unresponsive tanned fingers.

Through the windows the distant hills lay streaked by the first beams of morning. A lark

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whistled greetings to the day. But neither sunlight
nor birdsong pierced the despair shrouding the
gloomy chamber.

CHAPTER XIII

WHAT SHALL WE DO FOR OUR SISTER?

THEY laid the body on a cot in the corner, and Manuel fetched a blanket and reverently composed and decently covered the boyish form. In moving the head he touched the wound, and something hot and wet ran down his fingers. He bent closer; the cot was crimsoning.

"Meestah Jone!" he called. "Es-she no dead. Look!" His voice filled with suppressed joy as he displayed the hand that had been against the wound.

Both men cast a startled glance at the stain on his fingers—at him—at each other; went over to the blanketed figure and stood regarding it, their hearts wildly throbbing. Something could be done for her, then, and all went swiftly to work. She was placed on Miller's bed, a vaquero was dispatched for her

mother, and Bailey galloped to Santa Rosa for the nearest doctor.

Two hours must pass before help could reach them, and in the meantime they must do what they could. Manuel brought hot water and towels, and he and Miller worked anxiously to restore Belle to consciousness. Had it been a wounded man, they would have proceeded easily, but each had the same chivalrous tenderness for her sex, and they hesitated, the one regarding her with the throbbing embarrassment of full vigour, the other with the calmer reluctance of age.

They unfastened her garment at the throat, laid bare the dazzling white neck, and held compresses, as hot as they could bear, against the wound at the base of her skull. As soon as these cooled they were renewed, and each time the stain was more pronounced on them.

The two men had been striving thus with death for an hour or more, when an imperceptible change in her countenance, a slight return of colour to cheeks and lips, told the old soldier that life feebly was starting again. He clasped her wrist and, with a

finger on her pulse, held it expectantly. There was the merest flutter, only the noiseless stir of a soul, but that was sufficient.

"Christ!" he exultantly exclaimed. "Put you feenger here."

When Miller found the throb his breath came in a sigh. He did not speak, but the look he gave Manuel brightened with the exultation that had rung in the old man's words, and his fingers slipped down over hers. Some warmth lingered in the little, work-hardened hand resting unresponsively in his. He glanced at her face—started. Manuel, too, bent closer; both had detected a tremble of the lids.

The master of Casa Grande straightened up. He was holding her hand in his, too—grasping it with a firm, compelling pressure. Had she been conscious, she must have thrilled to him. As it was, her soul must have stirred, for her lids fluttered and languidly opened, then closed.

"Miller—Manuel," she sighed, and they knew that she had seen.

Miller drew up a chair and sat beside the bed, a hand still clasping hers. Not a move escaped him;

not a breath was drawn that he did not feel. He had time to think, at last, and his crowding emotions warred with one another. She had been shot on his ranch, with his consent, however ignorantly given, however keenly regretted. She had been shot while committing a crime, a cowardly crime, an unpardonable offence. All his interest in her, all his growing admiration, suddenly had ended with the discovery of her treachery.

A clatter of hoofs in the courtyard sent him to the doorway, where he met Mrs. Clark, and silently he led the way in. Her escort had informed her of the shooting, and she did not cry out at sight of her daughter, did not even sob. The repressing influences of frontier life had long subdued the feminine impulses that under softer conditions are usually vented in noisy grief. She mutely waited by her daughter's side, and when the girl slowly opened her eyes, her mother tenderly enfolded her and buried a tearless face in the tangled mass of hair. Miller pushed up an easy-chair for the newcomer, but after she was seated he caught only resentment in her eyes.

Constant bandaging had brought relief to the wound, reducing the congestion, and the next time the cloths were changed the bullet showed as a lump under the skin, where it now pressed painfully. The patient twisted her head uneasily and complained of the hurt.

"You are wounded," Miller explained.

"I remember," she moaned. "My neck aches so."

"The doctor will soon be here."

"It's so long," she sighed.

They turned her in a new position, and asked if she was easier, but she only sighed again.

They changed the compresses, and Manuel carefully examined the lump. "Me feex him," he confidently declared, and left the room, to return with a lance-like instrument.

"What are you going to do?" demanded Miller.

"Cut heem out," was the answer, with boy-like eagerness.

"You are not. The doctor will soon be here."

"Me dam' good es-surgeon."

"I know, old man. But she isn't a soldier."

"Let him," said Belle, appealingly.

"Me do heem bery easy," urged Manuel.

"Go on, Manuel," called the girl, trying to turn herself.

The old man gently and deftly removed the bullet, which fell to the floor, to be forgotten, for the time, in more pressing necessities. There were no anaesthetics to deaden pain, yet the only sign she made of suffering was the tightening of her fingers about Miller's as he stood over her, one hand holding towels for Manuel, the other clasping hers.

When the operation had been concluded and the last bandage fastened, Miller drew back with noticeable relief. The acting surgeon looked at his assistant's dry, bloodless lips, his cheeks almost ghastly beneath the crisp, reddish beard, and he laughed softly. He knew the stress the master had been under, but the old soldier, in his years of campaigning, had lost the finer edge of sympathy for unavoidable pain. "By 'n by," he lightly remarked, "you old man like me, woman no matter." He regarded the patient with satisfaction, glanced at his companion, and, in the way of final compliment for able assist-

ance, added, "Me theenk you dam' good es-surgeon, too"; then left the room.

As Miller crossed over to his seat something rolled from under his boot, and he picked it up. It was the bullet that had been extracted from Belle's wound, too small to fit any of the revolvers carried last night, except his own.

He dropped heavily in the chair, and saw again, in fancy, the flickering blaze against the end of his barn; the figure leaping about it and disappearing in the dark; the volley discharged by the pursuing horsemen. Of all the shots fired, his was the one that had wounded. He sadly examined the leaden ball; it was none other than his own. But his heart leaped to the sudden recollection that Manuel's keen eyes had not observed the size when he extracted it, and, now that it was safe in his own possession, no one knew who had fired the shot; no one could know.

He looked across to the girl, and to her mother, sitting beside her. The form on the bed seemed lifeless—the white face, with its framing of tangled hair, its closed eyes; the rigid figure starkly outlined by the blanket drawn to the chin. He could

detect no motion of her breathing, and he hastily rose with the gripping fear lest she had died. When he came beside her, her breast, with the folded hands lifted and fell ever so slightly, her parted lips disclosed perfect teeth, and her brow glistened with sweat.

He walked to the western windows. The half-burned pasture lay below him, and beyond, a grey heap, the ashes of the consumed stack. Everything reminded him of last night's destruction, and of Belle's appearance at the end. What had she been doing there? Why had she set fire to his barn? It was, however, neither time nor place to ask those questions, and when it came time perhaps he would not care.

Two galloping horsemen along the road from Santa Rosa turned his mind back to the more pressing demands of the hour, and he went to the courtyard to meet Bailey and the surgeon, whose jaded mounts told of hard riding.

At the bedside of the wounded girl the doctor's pleasant face became grave. He unshaded the windows, opened the outer doors and flooded the cham-

ber with light, to enable him the better to examine and dress the injury. He was big and noisy and confident, yet he was a long time bent over the girl, a long time silent; and when at last he was satisfied, he called Miller and Manuel to assist, and, with unusual care, dressed and bandaged the wound.

After the operation was over the doors were closed and the windows shaded again. The doctor sat thoughtfully beside the patient, looking at her, but not seeing her. Her mother dejectedly stood opposite, and the two others back in the shadows. All of them knew that the case was serious; that the struggle with death would be fierce; that only the girl's splendid vitality and substance would pull her through.

The surgeon rose at length, put away his appliances and closed his medicine case; his visit was finished. Once more his face lighted cheerily, and, as he turned to go, he said, in his bluff, hearty way: "A bad wound, but a healthy subject."

"She will get well?" anxiously ventured her mother.

The doctor replied without hesitation, but after

the guarded manner in doubtful cases: "If every wound I have to dress is as likely to heal, I'd soon be famous."

"Then we'll take her right home," declared Mrs. Clark, in a tone of relief. "The sooner the better."

"Oh, no, madam. The quieter the better. She mustn't be moved."

"We'd rather have her dead than here."

The surgeon's glance turned keenly on Miller, whose face expressed pain at the unhappy remark. Some hidden resentment must lie in the woman's declaration, some injury, perhaps, with which the physician had no concern. "You are her mother," he rejoined, without irritation. "I've done what I can."

He paused at the threshold, as if awaiting the final decision. The widow always had wavered before great perplexities, and now her eyes were fixed on the floor, and she nervously fingered the cover thrown over her daughter. The room grew silent; only the splash of the fountain sounded through the open window. She turned appealingly to Bailey, who moodily leaned on the footboard of the bed, his

hands spread wide, his gaze on Belle's white face. Miller, watching with quiet interest, drew a deep breath when the man turned and said:

"Leave her."

The doctor bowed slightly, as if in acknowledgement of their deference to his wish, and passed out, Miller following. In the courtyard the master of Casa Grande asked what would be the most immediate danger.

While the surgeon made fast his saddle-bags he explained that the bullet had grazed her jugular and also the base of her skull. If the inflammation that accompanies healing should be severe, the walls of the artery might give way, and death would follow from hemorrhage. Or the nerve-tissue at the top of the spine might be seriously affected—then paralysis, either temporary or fatal. Under the most favourable circumstances she would be long rallying from the nervous shock. "But," he said, in conclusion, "she is young and strong, and we must pull her through."

When the doctor had ridden out of the courtyard Bailey joined Miller, and, in a tone of satisfaction,

remarked: "I've got the old lady straightened out, and she has agreed to take off Belle's clothing and make her comfortable."

"It will be a long struggle," said Miller, reflectively, "and I must overcome the widow's resentment. Here's the place for the girl, if comfort and attention count."

"What do you think she was doing behind the barn last night?" asked the sheriff, in troubled tones.

The ranchero moodily shook his head and turned away. "We mustn't think about anything, now, but getting her well."

"I'm dead tired," rejoined Bailey, suddenly remembering what was before them. He went to his mount, and added: "I'll put up my horse and then to bed. We'll have to stand our watch with Belle to-night."

CHAPTER XIV

T WAS ASLEEP, BUT MY HEART WAKED

THE week following the doctor's visit was trying. Belle dozed continuously, indifferent to surroundings, her vitality consumed in a struggle to undo the evil of the wound. The injured tissue sloughed away, and the poison from it tainted her blood and prostrated her.

The surgeon came daily, but faith in her vitality and the healing power of nature made his calls errands of good cheer rather than professional services. He watched the patient with an anxiety his manner belied, and, though he gave no remedies, his frequent visits fortified the others for days of suspense.

Miller's comfortable apartment was relinquished to the wounded girl. On the walls were a half-dozen engravings, copies of masterpieces; on the shelf above the fireplace were a few well-read vol-

umes of the world's greatest books; the furniture was quaint and solid, and bearskin rugs were everywhere. In the hush and darkness that prevailed, however, evidences of taste and fancy were unnoticed.

The chamber looked through two windows to the north, through two others and a door to the west, with a door to the living-room. In the north wall there was a fireplace, where night and day a log blazed, adding warmth and colour, the one glow of cheer.

The sombreness of the close-curtained room wore on the man, who was in it but little; he realised how much more it must depress the girl's mother, in it continuously, and he was as alert to save her as to relieve her daughter.

It was hard to decide which of the women was the greater care. The master of Casa Grände had said he must win Mrs. Clark's confidence, and he went resolutely at the task. Her distrust was not the distrust of jealousy, nor of propriety, but prompted rather by a feeling of nameless injury. Belle had been in no condition to explain her pres-

ence at the barn the morning of her wounding, and her mother had not been satisfied by the vaqueros' statements, which left her with a vague consciousness that Miller was culpable.

She was a woman of lively intuitions, and her host saw at once that the way to overcome her prejudice was by his manner. He beamed on her with courtesy and deference, and the mantle of distrust, wrapped closely when she entered his house, soon was loosened and cast aside, even as the cloak of a pedestrian is removed when he tramps under a mid-day sun.

The first night of their vigil with Belle the weary mother was induced to go to bed after midnight, because Bailey watched with Miller. The succeeding night, however, she and the master of the house watched together; but a couch was arranged in the room, and when he at last persuaded her to lie down, she slept till the usual hour for rising.

Night after night the same thing happened, and when, a week later, Bailey came again to watch, the tired nurse was glad to leave the men with the patient, who had grown worse instead of better.

After that the widow yielded less stubbornly to the host's gentle insistence. Her perceptions told her that she could not stand the strain of constant wakefulness, and that, even if she could, her daughter was content to be cared for by Miller. Her temper, never the sweetest, was becoming affected, and she had to admit that her condition reacted on Belle and retarded her recovery.

Her confidence in Miller slowly extended. He had a way with Belle that quieted, even after her nervousness had been added to by her mother, and the nurse was beginning to look for his homecoming, not alone because he could help the patient, but because he cheered the mother, fortified her drooping courage. She, who always had leaned on a more resolute personality—her husband, then her daughter—was now turning to the master of Casa Grande.

For the first time in the widow's barren life the graciousness of association became her daily experience, and a new consciousness was waking. The domination of sex she had known, but the imperiousness of femininity, beginning at infancy and end-

ing with age, was a revelation, late, perhaps, but none the less joyous. The unconscious command of woman over man, the homage she may compel from him, were fragrances that had not before drifted to her work-hardened life. Superiority, after all, is not a possession of riches or fame, but of an indefinable something in the soul.

Belle, too, felt the influence that had been softening her mother. The inherent power of her sex over men had already been disclosed to her. It had come as a vague consciousness, unexplained as yet, and thus far it was enough to live it, feel it grow with opportunity. Bailey had first waked it—indifferently, without an added heart-throb. And then this other man came to set her every nerve aquiver. She had fought him, hated him, thrilled to him, warred with herself because she grieved that he was above her.

The night he had ridden her down and folded her in his arm her heart had caught the throb of his. He had humbled himself then, and pointed her the way to become his equal, her heart forever to throb with his. She was now too listless to care what the

end might be, but her spirit, fluttering just on the limit of consciousness, felt securely anchored in his keeping.

The night after Bailey had watched the second time, Belle lay thinking of Miller's faithfulness. He had been working long to cool the fever that kept sleep away, and when she had grown quiet she saw him sitting before the fireplace, his head thrown back against the chair, his eyes closed. There were lines on his face not there a month ago, and in the ruddy glow his cheeks showed hollow and shadowy. The expression stirred her motherhood with a sudden consciousness that the man, prodigal in the comforting of others, at last needed comforting. Her throat filled and tears dropped on her pillow, because she must smother the impulse to open her arms and call him to come.

Although longing to speak, her intuitions kept her silent. Something in his manner had changed—what, she could not tell, as he had not mentioned the forest fire. He was courteous, attentive, almost desperately helpful, but with an air of performing a task—as if forcing an appearance of interest to cover

a feeling of dread. She fell asleep, wondering if he had forgotten the night he rode her down, or whether he regretted it.

He went to her at last. She lay facing the fire, her hands clasped, her head resting on her extended arms. He could not see that she had been weeping—the light was too dim to show the stain on the pillow—but her attitude was a helpless appeal that troubled him. The doctor's manner showed increasing anxiety; Bailey had protested that something more should be done, and his own judgment told him that she was failing. What the trouble was he did not know, but he would discuss her condition to-morrow when the doctor called and decide if a consultation were necessary.

The doctor did not appear next day, and after it grew late Miller sent for him to come without fail in the morning.

That evening Belle's spirit tugged at its bonds. When the house had grown silent her fever raged, and the man worked over her alone and with growing anxiety. He tried cooling waters from the icy springs of Aguas Frias. He bound the wound with

them, packed her head in wet towels, flung open the room to the breath of night; yet without quieting her.

The brightness of her eyes increased, and she talked irrationally. Her mind lingered on the forest fire and her own wounding, and more than once he thought she would explain why she had been there. Subconsciousness, however, was on duty and held back the disclosure.

She asked to sit at the open door. He helped her into the big rocking-chair and dragged it where the night drifted in. She leaned back restfully and listened to the hum of insects, the hoot of an owl, the howl of coyotes. The brightness went out of her eyes, her skin dried and her breathing slowed.

They were a long time silent. Her delirium had reminded him of the squatters, and it seemed to him that here must be a halting-place in their warfare. A mistake had been made, and the sweetest life of all had been offered in sacrifice for it. Some one had attempted a cowardly wrong, and the blow fell on her, but the anguish was his. He would not admit that she had set the fire, and yet whoever had

planned the evil must be appalled at his own cruelty, and as long as she lay helpless in Casa Grande she was a hostage for good conduct.

After that—— But why look so far? The lash was on his back; he needed the discipline, for he had blundered, and he was profiting. When Belle should get well his duty would end and he be done with them all. No human life should again be on his hands, even if he must lose every building and every hoof on the range. Hereafter, mistrust of the Clarks would hold him aloof. He had felt certain of Belle, even of Wash; yet his own barn had been set on fire, and she alone had been found there; his confidence had been misplaced. If she did not recover——

She moved and said that she was tired, and he helped her to bed. A new complication developed: from burning fever she went to shivering chill. He closed doors and windows, stirred the fire, and applied hot water, but she grew worse. He came to the end of his resources, and then gave a quieting powder left by the doctor for emergencies only.

The dose checked the chill, but did not stop it. In half an hour he gave another, this time with decided

effect. Soon he was anxiously bent over the unconscious girl, who was very weak. Her breathing quickened and grew loud; her pulse fluttered; her lids partly opened; her jaw relaxed. There was no light but the glow from the hearth, yet it showed her stark under the covers, colorless as the sheets.

What if she should die here, alone with him! His soul called on its Maker to spare this scourge, while the anguish of the crucified rent him. Her life was in the hollow of his own hand; how should he answer for it? Again he bent over the motionless form, acutely sensitive to her wavering breath. He took her hand in both of his and went with her down to the bank of the deep and silent river of death, and gazed across to where vision fails.

And then he led her back. The house waked once more and Mrs. Clark relieved him. Belle's skin was moist, her breathing easy; her lips had closed and a faint color was in her cheeks.

The man whose soul had cried in anguish came out under the fading stars and leaned restfully against a column of the porch, his breath drawn deeply. Birds twittered in the vines, the fountain

plashed softly, and in the east was the first glow of day. With unconscious thankfulness he lifted his eyes toward the light; the daughter of morning, clad in rose-colour, was trailing her garments across the sky.

CHAPTER XV

OR EVER I WAS AWARE

SOON after breakfast Miller sent another messenger for the doctor. The master of Casa Grande was apprehensive lest the wound was not properly healing, fever and delirium indicating blood-poisoning, and he expressed his fear in a note given the messenger.

Belle had been quiet since her mother went in to her, and, as a cattle buyer had arrived to procure beef for the holiday trade, the ranchero went down to the feeding-sheds and helped the vaqueros cut out the animals selected by the purchaser. As these were the first product of his range, he was pleased and flattered by the praise bestowed on their superior condition. Better even than the praise was the price paid him, almost fabulous compared with the value of ordinary range cattle.

He was roused from absorption in the trade by the appearance of Manuel on Peggy. It was an unheard of liberty for any of the men to use the mare, and Miller knew that Belle was in distress again.

As the two men returned hastily to the house, Manuel said, in explanation of his coming: "La señorita bery es-strong feber just now."

"How long has she been suffering?" Miller asked.

Manuel explained that she had been awake for more than an hour; that he and her mother had tried everything they knew for relief, but without success, and then they had decided to send for him.

When Miller went into the sick-room Belle was restlessly staring about, too delirious to recognise him. Her mother sat rocking beside her, with hands helplessly folded, head resting on the back of her chair, and eyes shut. She looked up on hearing the man's soft footfall, and rose.

"What shall we do?" she anxiously inquired. "I'm so glad you've come! We've tried everything we can think of, and she gets worse."

"You are tired," Miller answered. "I've just sold some beef steers, and the buyer will be in to dinner.



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"Help Manuel prepare something extra, will you?
I'll see what can be done with Belle."

He put pillows under the girl's shoulders to relieve the blood-pressure in her head. She stared with unseeing vision through open door and windows, mumbling incoherently, brushing her hair with both hands back from her flushed cheeks and smacking her lips. He offered her water; she would not drink. He was afraid to move her nearer the door again, and at last he went to the drawer and took out a powder. But she refused to swallow it, and while he was considering how to administer it he concluded to wait for the coming of the doctor, so that the professional man might have full benefit of the worst symptoms.

He kept a wet towel about her head and did what he could in other ways to lower her temperature, certain that he was retarding the progress of the fever. As the sun leaned toward the west, however, the air grew hotter, and the delirium increased.

During the dinner hour Miller could not leave his patient, and he struggled alone with her increasing restlessness. She attempted to get out of bed; she

insisted on going outdoors; she must have one of the rifles on the wall; but gently and soothingly he held her back, his personality exercising a subtle restraint, and at last had her lying quiet, her lids closed. The log was blazing in the fireplace, and he went across to smother it in ashes. As he bent over his task she called to him:

"You shan't burn the barn!"

He straightened up and steadied himself against the mantel. She was lying on her side, and gazed past him, out the door.

"Stamp it out!" she commanded, "or else I will." She lay in the same position and stared the same way.

"You cowards!" she went on. "No; I won't tell. Run! They're coming. Quick!" She sat up and pointed her finger at him.

He bent down again, replaced the shovel he had been holding, and leaned heavily against the wooden shelf, with a feeling as if a band were tightening about his heart. She was explaining the mystery of the attempt to burn his barn.

"I'll put it out," she said, more quietly. After a



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short pause, her arms went into the air and waved frantically, while she called in alarm: "Quick! They're coming!" and threw herself forward on the covers.

He straightened her back on the pillows, his voice low and calming, his hands clasping her wrists.

She stared unknowingly in his face, and called, with a piercing cry: "Run! The dog!" Her tones denoted terror, and she sat upright, in spite of his hold on her. "They're yelling! No! No! Miller!"

She threw herself back and sobbed hysterically, both hands covering her face.

In helpless misery he bent over her. The only thing he thought to do was to stroke back the hair from her cheeks, too grieved to remember anything but the scene when the girl had been shot as she tried to put out a fire started by others. All his posse that night had held in their souls a desire to kill, and the desire had been nearly accomplished. In the light of newly acquired knowledge, he wished that every revolver on the ranch had been burned in the fire that swept the valley.

The doctor had ridden quietly into the courtyard

and entered the dwelling without Miller's knowledge. The girl's screaming reached the caller's ears, as well as her mother's. They ran into her room and caught the picture at the bedside. The doctor stood a moment, as if to seize the purport of it, and then swiftly advanced, his face sombre.

It did not take long for the surgeon to decide that Miller's fears were well founded, as he quietly said: "We must open the wound, John—blood-poisoning."

The girl regarded him vaguely, and turned her eyes on Miller. Again she went over the scene at the fire, and when she wildly threw her arms about, the men, standing on opposite sides of the bed, each grasped a wrist in an effort to quiet her.

"She's going to die!" wailed Mrs. Clark, her apron in her hands.

"No, madam," answered the doctor, somewhat curtly. "We'll probe the wound, and she'll soon come out of this. Will you ask Manuel to have hot water ready?"

When she left the room, the surgeon relaxed his hold of Belle, straightened up, and said: "I hope

she'll stay away till we're done. She's a good woman, but helpless—unreliable in a pinch." He glanced at John, still holding the girl's wrists, and quietly asked: "Did you shoot the real incendiary?"

Miller shook his head, dejectedly walked to the western window, and gazed long into the valley of the Aguas Frias.

Belle moved uneasily, as if to get out of bed. The doctor restrained her with soothing words, and called to the ranchero: "We must calm her, John, so that I can get at the wound." And when John came to the bed, the doctor prepared a quieting dose and gave it.

As soon as the patient was unconscious they called in Manuel, with hot water, and opened and cleansed the wound. It had healed too fast outside, and absorption was causing the mischief.

When the bandaging had been finished the patient was made comfortable, the room darkened and silence restored. "She'll soon be better," hopefully remarked the doctor, as he put away his instruments. "It will be hours before she recovers from the effects of the opiate. In the meantime, John"—

he spoke kindly, the thought of the mistake made in shooting the girl vivid in his mind—"get what rest you can. You'd better be here when she wakes."

The doctor sat down beside the bed, and as he regarded his patient a new interest in her awoke. He all along had felt that there was more to this woman than the ordinary country girl. He had known of Bailey's attraction, but Miller's was another matter, not so easy to explain. It was a difficult position for a young man like the master of Casa Grande. So they had shot her for the person who had put fire to the barn, while she had been trying to extinguish it. A very interesting complication. His mind wandered off to dreamland, to the days of his own youth and its glowing ideals. A movement of the host roused him, and he quietly rose.

They left the chamber together and went to the courtyard. When the doctor was riding away Miller asked him to send word of Belle's condition to Bailey. The sheriff might like to come out, next day being Sunday.

Mrs. Clark took charge of the patient the re-

mainder of the afternoon and until bedtime, which permitted Miller to get much-needed sleep.

It was about nine o'clock when the master of Casa Grande went to his place beside the still unconscious girl. She had been moving somewhat restlessly before he came in, and the household had gone softly to bed. They had not long been quiet when Bailey rode up. Miller met him in the courtyard, led the way into the dining-room, and was about to sit down by the table.

"No," objected the newcomer; "I want to see her."

"She has been uneasy for the past hour," replied Miller, "as if she might come from under the influence of the opiate given at noon."

"We'll be very quiet," urged the sheriff.

When the two men stood beside the girl, lying wan and rigid, with closed lids, their faces were as grave as if watching over the dead. There was no sound in the room, not even the flicker of a blaze in the fireplace. The log had burned to a glowing coal, which shed a dim, soft radiance about the hearth and threw fantastic shadows in the corners. Had it

not been for the slight rise and fall of the hands clasped over the breast they might have thought Belle lying in her shroud.

The sheriff went noiselessly out, and the girl turned, but did not wake. The two men seated themselves by the dying fire in the dining-room and smoked a cigarette, while they talked in low tones.

"We must have a consultation, Miller," insisted Bailey.

"Wait till we see the effect of probing the wound."

"The wound should have healed without probing," indignantly replied the sheriff. "It's a case of neglect."

"The doctor has been attentive."

"That may be. But look at the girl—her thin hands and cheeks. She's losing strength every day."

"Go to bed, Sam," kindly commanded Miller. "Wait till you see her in the morning; then we'll decide." He lighted a candle and led the way to the guest's room. "I'll call you early to relieve me—by four or five."

Miller's return to the chamber roused Belle, who lay quietly observing him move about the dim room

to make ready for his long vigil. He arranged the fire, put out a pitcher of water in the night air, moved a chair near the bed, and stood for a moment studying her face.

"What time is it, Mr. Miller?" she asked, her voice thin and weak.

He smiled at her and laid his hand on her brow. It was damp and cooler, and he knew that she was rational again.

"It's after ten."

"I thought I heard you come in; it waked me up."

"Yes. I've been showing Sam Bailey to bed. He came an hour ago."

"Poor Sam!" she sighed. "I wish I had seen him."

"He was in here, but you were sleeping. He'll relieve me in the morning. Probably you'll see him when you wake again."

She brushed back the hair from her cheeks, pink from the effort to talk, and wearily moaned: "My head throbs like a hammer. I've had dreadful dreams—the morning after the fire over again."

"Never mind, now. Let's not talk of it."

"I can't get it out of my mind—the shooting of me."

"You'll be better now," he said, trying to turn her thoughts. "We put you under an opiate to probe your wound. That's what makes your head ache. It was healing too rapidly."

"I hope so," she groaned. "It's been a long time." She pressed her palms to her forehead. "Is maw sleeping? Poor maw! It's hard on her. And you, too—"

"Don't, Belle," he said, gently interrupting. "If you knew how this hurt of yours oppresses me, and what a relief it is to do for you, you'd not pity me."

But she only shook her head and sighed. "I'm wearing you out. If the bullet had gone a little higher or a little lower!" she answered, and listlessly folded her hands.

He drew his chair closer. It was the first complaint she had uttered, and the pity of it all was suffocating him. Sleeping or waking, he must have ever before him this picture of the suffering he had inflicted. Perhaps if it were settled now why she had been at the barn the morning after the fire the

subject would leave her thoughts. At least, he could make the effort, and with evident hesitation he asked:

"Why were you there?"

She turned on her side and silently regarded him. A reproach he could not endure was in her manner, and he hastily added: "You said, in your delirium, that you were trying to put out a fire started by another."

She nodded.

"I knew you didn't set it!"—there was a note of relief in his voice—"even if I did see you."

"You have suspected me, Mr. Miller. I felt it as soon as I knew where I was, after the shooting. I didn't; I wouldn't." She was very weak, and she covered her face with her hands and sobbed.

He rose and walked across the room a time or two. When he sat down again she reached out her hand, and as he clasped it her fingers trustingly closed on his.

They were a long time silent. The clearing away of the mystery in the attempt to burn his barn brought them suddenly close. Since that trying

morning a wall had risen between them, and as the days passed it seemed to grow higher. It could not shut away his tireless attention, his watchful anxiety; yet the feeling of comradeship had disappeared, and with it something had dropped from her life. But as suddenly as the barrier had risen it fell, and for the first time since she had been in his house she caught the faint splashing of the fountain.

She withdrew her other hand from her eyes, and moved it, too, down to his, her two over his one. She held him thus quietly a little while in the dim light of the noiseless chamber, two souls face to face once more after separation, and alone.

"I'm not wholly bad-tempered," she timidly whispered.

He hastily turned his face away, lest she should catch the quiver in his breath.

CHAPTER XVI

AS ONE THAT FOUND PEACE

MILLER slept late next morning—Sunday. There could not well be a day of rest on a cattle range where many animals are cared for and fed, but on Aguas Frias the Sabbath passed more leisurely than other days, and the ranchero's conscience failed to rouse him at the accustomed hour.

The entire household, in fact, slept late, as if the past week had overtaxed their endurance; and Bailey, who had been watching with Belle since four, wondered if no one ever would stir. The patient had slept continuously, and he, too, had dozed till the sun rose; then he grew impatient, and concluded that he was not adapted to the sick-room.

Sounds came at last from within, as well as without, and Mrs. Clark appeared, to find her daughter still sleeping and the sheriff anxious to be relieved.

Breakfast over, the sun climbed high in a cloudless sky, and the air grew warm; but the master of Casa Grande slept on, and Bailey, for want of something to do, wandered off with the men.

Belle waked at last, refreshed, and for the first time since she was wounded bethought of her personal appearance. "I wish I had a looking-glass," she remarked.

From Miller's bureau her mother took an old-fashioned hand-glass and gave it to her daughter. The invalid studied her reflection, and a touch of sadness was in her voice when she declared that she was like a squaw.

Her mother smiled indulgently; she noted her daughter's milk-white complexion, unnaturally pale after the weeks of confinement, and lightly answered, "All but your skin."

"I'd like to fix up, maw," she said, half-ashamed of her unaccustomed vanity. "My hair can be brushed, and perhaps my sack is with the clothes you sent for."

When Bailey returned the girl was transformed, and as he caught the contrast of dark hair and skin

almost transparent in its fairness, it recalled pictures he had seen of Madonnas. A sudden fear gripped him lest she would not live, but the red bolero vest she wore, snug and jaunty, left sufficient of the earthly to allay his alarm.

He lounged restlessly about the chamber, lost without the host. To put in the morning, he had wandered till tired, and then returned to the house. He asked if Miller had been called, but Manuel, who, more than any one else, had realised the strain of the past days, stood guard over the master's door.

"Meestah Jone dam' tired," was the well-meaning protest. "Heem all time smile, all time do this, all time do that; you theenk him no played out. You bet, heem sleepy! One week more, heem be die."

Now that they were reminded, each remembered how haggard Miller had grown, and they united in keeping the house quiet. But as the day wore on, and he did not appear, the silence became gloomy, and they understood what his absence meant.

"Where's Gyp?" asked Belle. "She hasn't been in this morning; she usually sleeps here."

Bailey went to find the dog, but Manuel told him

that she was at her master's bedside. He did not add that he had lately looked in on the sleeping man and had seen Gyp crouched beside her master. He feared, if he did, that the sheriff would look in, too.

When Bailey wandered forlornly back to the invalid she motioned to the chair beside her, and said, "Talk to me." She was moved by his dejection.

"What shall we talk about?" he absently asked, seating himself.

"Oh—the weather." The humorous gleam in her eyes reached through his self-absorption.

He leaned across the bed and cheerfully scrutinised her, the smile fading from his lips. "I never thought you beautiful before."

The sudden flash of admiration embarrassed her, and she turned her face toward the windows, where blue sky showed. "Do you think it's going to rain soon?"

"Rain!" He laughed boisterously at her evasion. "It doesn't look like it, now. But I have a feeling that it will before the week is past." He settled back in his chair, and his thoughts wandered. "Next Sun-

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day will be Thanksgiving," he continued; "not the holiday, but the celebration. I hope it 'll be dry. I'm going to send some turkeys. You must be well enough to come to table."

"I hope I may. I do want to get out of this!"

"Miller is a good fellow," the sheriff irrelevantly asserted.

She did not answer, but took up the mirror beside her and twirled it in her hands.

"Why don't you say he is?" banteringly demanded the speaker.

She looked at him with a pleased expression, and softly laughed. "Oh, Sam, why don't you ask me to say the sun shines!"

He bent toward her, and replied, somewhat nettled: "Doggone it! I don't see the harm of telling a fellow."

"Sam Bailey," she said, smiling again, "look in this mirror and tell me what you see."

He took the little hand-glass and examined its quaint design, its exquisite finish, but avoided his own reflection.

"Why don't you look in it?"

He laid it back on the covers and kept his eyes on her face. "I'd rather look at you."

"Let's be friends," she soberly replied, and extended her hand.

He clasped her fingers and, in spite of her struggles, pressed them to his lips.

"You mustn't," she declared, with evident annoyance.

He lightly replied that he would rather not be friends on those conditions.

Hoofbeats echoed from the courtyard, and the sheriff went out to greet the doctor, who had ridden in. He found his patient physically improved, but low-spirited. She was attractive in her first toilet, yet he missed the curve of lip, the gleam of teeth, that belong with holiday attire.

"Where's John?" he asked.

They told him that the master still slept.

"Good, good," he declared, rubbing his hands.
"He needs it."

"He's been sleeping a long time," protested the patient. "Some one should call him before he sleeps himself into a fever."

The doctor sat down beside her and took her hand in a fatherly way, his lips twitching. "How long has John been sleeping?" was the quizzical demand.

"He left me before four," she answered, with the suspicion of a pout.

The surgeon looked at his watch and grunted, then softly laughed. "Four! It's nearly twelve. You don't grudge the poor man eight hours' sleep, miss?"

She laughed an abashed little laugh, and reached her other hand to clasp his, her face hidden by her extended arm. "It seems eight days," she softly replied.

"Eight days?" he as softly repeated, and patted the hand lying in his. A curious fancy awoke. How would this hand look in a glove, with jewelled rings? It was white, now, and the fingers tapered. He raised his eyes to her face—it still was hidden—and again he musingly remarked, "Eight days?"

Something in his tone caused her to look shyly up. His eyes were kind, and he said, so that no one could hear, "I'll call him for dinner, honey."

"No, no," she whispered; "he must have rest."

And then her mother stepped in, with the remark that she had seen Miller.

The widow had gone out when the doctor asked for John, and, as Manuel was not in sight, she quietly opened the sleeping man's door. He lay relaxed, his head thrown back in utter weariness, and by the dim light his face showed hollow and worn, but his breathing was deep and measured.

Her eyes fell on the dog, which crouched near the bed, and which eyed her with a savage gleam, as if ready to spring, the hair upright on her back. In days of strength the whole world was Gyp's friend; in days of weakness she knew only her master.

Mrs. Clark hastily withdrew and reported what she had seen. The company listened indifferently, even the dog's fidelity but lightly impressing them. They wanted to see their host, not hear of him, and when dinner was announced it was a relief. The doctor waked Miller, and the three men dined together, then went to Belle.

Miller stopped at the foot of the bed to regard the patient. She turned away her face, but there were

light in her eyes, colour in her cheeks, curves in her lips. She had caught the pleasure in his look, and held out her hand.

He took the doctor's seat, observed her with great content, and asked of the physician, "What do you think?"

The doctor's face lighted. He at last discovered where Belle's spirits had been, and, much pleased at his penetration, answered, "I think I've found a remedy."

"A secret?" obtusely asked Miller.

"Yes. The next time she needs a prescription I'll give one that you can fill." The speaker chuckled.

Mrs. Clark had gone to the vaqueros; Bailey had walked to the window and was gazing moodily at the hills; the others made a familiar group by themselves.

Miller studied the smiling face of the doctor, and shook his head. "I'm dense to-day," he said, in reply to the last remark. "Must have slept too long." He laughed in sympathy with the doctor and stroked the girl's hand, still in his. "Looks as if we have good red blood in us yet!"

"Yes; we're very cheerful." The doctor took his hat from the bed. "There doesn't seem any need for me now. There may be, however, if you stay away again eight——"

Belle quickly withdrew her hand and turned away her head; the doctor laughed teasingly as he left the room.

Miller's face grew grave as he followed the surgeon into the courtyard. The ranchero suspected that some by-play between the professional man and his patient had caused the doctor to conclude that the master of Casa Grande's attentions to the girl were growing personal. The younger man wondered if he had given her cause to deem his regard anything more than paternal interest, and he resolved to be more careful in future.

Bailey went to town with the physician, and the master of the range, to get outdoors, walked down to the feeding-sheds, Gyp close at his heels, an act quite unusual for her.

Manuel watched them from the open door, and went into Belle's room to remark: "Gyp, he glad see Meestah Jone. She no lose heem to-day!"

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"Manuel," called Belle, as he turned away, "do you think Gyp the only one glad?"

The old Mexican went soberly back and studied her face till the shadow of a flush came in her cheeks. He was growing to like her, and his instinct for romance was still keen. He knew very well who else was glad, yet he egotistically answered:

"Oh, no, señorita; me dam' glad see heem. By 'n by, you know heem long time like me know heem, you be dam' glad, too." He hastened away, softly laughing.

She moved uneasily, her colour deepening, and glanced at her mother, who sat placidly rocking. The girl wondered what Manuel had found in her question to amuse him; wondered if a girl must be laughed at because of friendship for a man, and wonder changed to irritation.

When Miller returned he bore a mass of freshly cut tollones, the ripening berries turning red. Belle was alone for the moment, and quick as she beheld his burden she gave a little cry of joy and held out her arms.

He gave them to her, and she folded them as she

had folded the azaleas and, without a word, buried her face in the blaze of colour. As she handed them back her eyes were shining, her cheeks and lips aglow.

"What have you done!" he called, in bantering dismay, and offered the glass to her, but she steadily turned away her eyes.

"Look at your cheeks and lips! I didn't know that the red comes off the berries!"

She gently pushed back his hand holding the mirror, painfully conscious of the differing emotions roused by the two men's compliments. When she again looked at him her colour had deepened, and he beheld the same glance he had caught the day she took his azaleas.

This time his lids did not droop.

CHAPTER XVII

STAY YE ME

THE storm broke in the middle of the week, and the vaqueros battled gallantly with the elements. The Aguas Frias foamed down to the Calabezas, the water overflowing its banks.

Miller was needed among his men, and the day-time rarely found him in the house. No matter what preparation may have been made, the first rains of winter never find the rancheros quite ready.

Belle had not improved. The doctor attended regularly, but there were distressing conditions he could not relieve. The girl complained of numbness in hands and feet, and showed growing inability to help herself.

Sunday was kept, however, a holiday, and a thankful party assembled in Casa Grande. Bailey came from Santa Rosa Saturday night, and Belle,

to the delight of all, managed to sit at the table for Thanksgiving dinner. The old house may have echoed to noisier rejoicing, but never with more sincere gratitude.

The meal finished, Belle was moved close to the dining-room fire, Bailey ever near. A premonition of impending evil that would cause her more suffering kept him subdued. He hung over her in helpless solicitude, and refrained from doing or saying anything that would sadden her.

The rain poured again when the sun went down, and all night long the tile roof hummed with music from the clouds. Peace was in the rhythm, and when a sleeper waked it was to stretch himself indolently, with a sense of protection, a feeling of security, because the primitive dwelling had been sturdily planned against both man and the elements.

The day's happenings had exhausted the patient, and she could not sleep. After Bailey had gone to bed she strove vainly against growing nervousness until her mother called Miller, and then she lay regarding him with wide-open eyes. He brought comfort, but not slumber.

Her dependence on the man had been growing with the passing days. She restlessly awaited his coming, when away, and could not be quieted unless he tended her. The struggle between longing for his presence and solicitude not to break him down distressed her.

It was a happy anxiety for Miller. To be the source of another's comfort was a new experience. To be dominated by the helplessness of this suffering woman he had greatly wronged, to find himself her strength and reliance—these made a gentle penance, and he gave himself cheerfully to her demands.

As a child depends on parental wisdom, so did Belle depend on Miller. Her weakness was too urgent for tenderness, except the tenderness of support. She was nearing the valley of deep shadows, and she held to him trustingly. Not alone her life but her spirit was in his keeping.

To-night as he sat beside her she clung to him. They did not speak, but her long-drawn sighs, her clasping fingers, were eloquent of need. He thought of holy men who bore the cross into the wilderness; of lonely souls that went out to their Maker in the

consolation of that symbol. Was it the symbol or the comradeship that comforted? Was it hope of future life, or a hand to steady the drifting spirit into the silent bark guided by an oarsman none has seen?

It grew late, and still those shining eyes turned trustingly to him. He rose at last and stirred the fire, then went to the table and took up the soothing mixture. "You must sleep, Belle," he kindly said.

She smiled at him.

In an hour the dose had worked its effect, but she moved uneasily, with strange mutterings in her slumber. The rain beat ceaselessly on the tiles, and their subdued melody drenched the silence with drowsiness. He nodded and swayed in his chair under that alluring lullaby. Then, noiselessly, to throw off the spell, he paced in the shadow.

Gyp alone watched with him. The instinct of the brute warned her of her master's distress, and whenever he moved she eyed him, alert to any change; whenever he stepped to the bedside she followed him and gently rose against the cover, to get sight of the sleeping woman, whom she curiously scented.

Mrs. Clark came long before daylight to relieve him. Belle had fallen into quieter slumber, and he went out, stirred the dining-room fire, and dozed in a chair till Manuel appeared to prepare breakfast. Then the master rode down under the grey dawn to the cattle-sheds.

A bear had come in the night and broken one of the corral gates. He evidently had met his match, for they could track him by crimson stains, and Cinnabar's short, stout horns also were stained. But the bull's shoulder was torn by claw or tooth, and the wound required attention. As soon as the men arrived they first trailed the midnight robber, and some miles away, in a clump of brush, they found him, dead. Then the young bull's wound was roughly dressed, and, to keep him quiet a day or two, he was driven to his dead sire's stall, beside Peggy's.

The sun had risen high as Miller and the men guided the unwilling Cinnabar through the court-yard gate. Near the dining-room door two dripping saddle-horses panted, and at sight of them Miller's heart stood still, as he realised how long he had been absent bear-hunting. He went swiftly into the house,

and found Bailey and the doctor, summoned while he was away, with Belle, who lay twisted and sunken, only her eyes and the unrhythmic motion of her chest telling of life. And yet she knew when he entered; she moved neither head nor body, but in the look she gave him there was an appeal that terrified him, held him for an instant in his tracks. Then he went to her and inquired the trouble.

The physician sat beside the bed, still clasping her pulse as he looked out the window. He turned at the ranchero's question and answered:

"Paralysis."

"Belle!" whispered Miller, dropping on his knees at the bedside. He drew her head to his shoulder and gently stroked back the tangled hair. In the presence of death his firmly reined emotions had slipped their bits and impulse alone controlled. It was not the tenderness of his action that impressed the others, but the hopelessness.

Belle closed her eyes languidly, yet in utter content, as if the world were bounded by his circling arm and the hereafter were without terror.

He quickly realised his position and, with some

embarrassment, laid her back on the pillows. Her mother, twisting her apron, leaned against the wall. When he looked at her, she, as if divining the question he would put, forlornly remarked:

"I don't know when it happened. About daylight, I think."

"Are you in pain, Belle?" he asked.

"She can't speak," explained the doctor.

Miller turned a questioning face to him, as if to ask relief for the patient, but the older man shook his head. "You might raise her up while we smooth the bed," he suggested.

Miller lifted her in his arms, and her mother straightened bed and pillows. The girl hung limp, her head dropping back. When he laid her down her limbs were composed and her position made restful, but her eyes alone expressed gratitude.

Bailey had stood silently leaning on the foot of the bed, and he curiously observed Miller make the girl comfortable. It was a womanly action, and for the first time it occurred to the sheriff that tenderness was not wholly a feminine quality.

The next thought that came in his mind was that

Miller's prompting was love for the girl, rather than an innate gentleness. But almost coincident was the reflection that he, too, loved her, yet he did not know how to make her comfortable.

The doctor rose stiffly from his seat, put his hand on her forehead, looked deep in her eyes, and, turning to Miller, said :

"She'll have to be frequently shifted, until she can help herself." His manner had lost its air of confidence, and he absently drew out pencil and paper. "Here's a prescription," he added, after he had finished writing. "You'd better have it filled at once."

The three men went to the courtyard, where the horses waited. The animals breathed easier, and their flanks were nearly dry. Miller offered fresh mounts to his friends, but they preferred their own, and the doctor put his medicine case in the saddle-bags and shifted the blanket on the horse's back.

"What will be the outcome, doctor?" Miller asked the question quietly, but with dry lips.

The physician leaned on his saddle and kindly regarded his friend. "It's the beginning of the end, I fear. The bullet injured the base of the brain or the

spine." He drew the cinch tight and gathered the reins. "I don't know what more to do, except keep her free from pain."

Miller would not yield to the doctor's mood, and he quickly replied, "She's strong yet."

"Her vitality is splendid. If only her limbs and speech alone were affected! But her heart—you heard how she breathes. It's the inside of her that troubles me. If her stomach is involved, she'll starve."

The suggestion made by Bailey not many days ago had been taking form in Miller's mind the past week, and he was now willing to consider other professional advice.

"You'll have no feeling, doctor," he asked, "if I propose a consultation?"

"You owe it to yourself, John, and to the girl."

"Then I shall send for Dr. Payne, the army surgeon at the San Francisco presidio."

"If he will only come!" replied the doctor, with new enthusiasm. "He has no equal on the Coast."

"We crossed the plains together," Miller replied, "and we are distantly connected."

"Just the man. Get him here as soon as you can." The doctor mounted and turned toward the gate. "Send for the prescription and give as directed," he called back.

Bailey had been a silent listener. The determined spirit of the man who was planning for Belle's recovery would yet save her life. Revived ardour stirred the sheriff, and he cheerily remarked, as he followed the doctor:

"I'll be ready, John—anything—day or night. It will be a godsend to help!"

The riders looked back as they passed the gate. The master of Casa Grande, still resolute, was leaning in great perplexity against the basin of the plashing fountain.

CHAPTER XVIII

TURN AWAY THINE EYES

THE next two days were grey with foreboding.

The doctor came regularly from Santa Rosa, but he could do nothing to check Belle's steady decline. She grew more deathlike with the hours, only her pleading eyes alive; and, behind the pleading, life-signals were slowly burning out.

The evening of the second day brought Dr. Payne, smiling and sympathetic, from San Francisco. It must have been a tedious trip, nearly all day coming less than fifty miles. If it were, he gave no sign of weariness, for the way had been full of charm, and as he approached Casa Grande, in the falling shadows, it seemed like riding to the land of knights-errant, the fashion of the dwelling suggesting attack and defence.

The world of men lay behind him, and he was

now in a world of fancy. The oaks and the madroños; the murmur of the Aguas Frias, still burdened with the storm of Sunday; the last calling of quail and the first yelping of coyotes, brought back his youth, with its idle, impossible longings. A spear and a sword, a coat-of-mail and a prancing steed—and smouldering fancies could easily be glowing realities.

And the maiden in distress—— His imagination gave way to sombre reflection at that picture, and as he drew near the shadowy castle fancy thronged with romantic reasons why he had been sent for. But the summons came from an old comrade, and the appeal had been too urgent to question.

The surgeon's first thought on entering the house was to look at the girl whose life awaited his skill. A conflict, invisible to human eyes, was raging in her crippled body slowly yielding under the assaults. Her heart was signalling distress, but the code, fragmentary and uncompiled, was his familiar study. Her pulse, in his firm clasp, bounded, wavered, struggled; he read the message confidently, hopefully.

He bent his ear to the rush of air through her lungs; nothing there interested him. He slowly worked his fingers over her skull—there he hesitated. He gazed long in her heavy eyes, as if searching the soul of her. When at last he turned away the repose of his face thrilled the man who had been watching at the opposite side of the bed.

Dr. Payne and Miller supped alone, for it was late when they sat down. The ranchero's spirits threw off the weight of oppression that had borne heavily since Belle's relapse. His companion, finely moulded and gentle, was poised with the confidence of self-reliance and success. It was good to be with him; to warm to his enthusiasm; to glow with his delight in living. Even though the newcomer avoided mentioning Belle, his subdued geniality carried the conviction that he had come on a mission of healing.

The next day was brilliant with December charm, and it brought the old doctor from Santa Rosa early and amiable, Bailey with him. The professional men spent a few minutes alone in consultation and then prepared for an operation.

"A blood-clot on the brain," said Dr. Payne, in explanation, to Miller, as they were making ready.
"We'll have to trephine her skull."

Mrs. Clark wandered desolately from room to room. Belle's illness had been a long trial, and she had not borne it well. Now that her daughter must undergo another operation, the case seemed hopeless, and the men could not but pity her. Miller and Bailey took her out to the courtyard and sought to divert her attention as well as their own.

But Dr. Payne soon called his host, and when Miller, also dreading this new ordeal, appealingly answered, "Not this time, Ned," the surgeon smilingly but relentlessly replied:

"A woman's life is at stake."

The master of Casa Grande left his companions in the sunshine, and in the room with the surgeons he found Manuel, clad in immaculate white from the grizzly hair of his well-shaped head to the ash-coloured moccasins on his feet, his face expressing modesty and concern.

As Dr. Payne scanned his fourth assistant there was approval in his smile as well as a twinkle in his



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eyes, and when everything was prepared he deferentially asked, "Are we ready, Manuel?"

"Meestah Jone and me ready, señor," was the simple answer.

The bedroom was flooded with light and air, and Miller was left to administer the anaesthetic, a task that more than once had been required of him by Dr. Payne.

Belle was laid on a table near the window, and Miller stood opposite, clasping her pulse, a saturated handkerchief over her mouth. She was facing him, and not once, while conscious, did her eyes move from his. She understood what they were about, but it little mattered so long as he was beside her. Her breathing thickened, her lids wavered, then closed. She was gone. Only her heart-throb was left; beating for him, beating, fluttering, almost stopping.

His attention soon was fixed on Dr. Payne. There was something fascinating in the skill of the operator. His hands were soft and flexible—Belle's were like them—his touch gentle, yet it never wavered.

Once the doctor glanced up; Miller stood grimly.

to the task, but the tint was gone from his cheeks and his lips were drawn. The surgeon went silently on.

As soon as Miller's assistance was no longer needed, he sat down in the deep window and leaned against the casing, where the breath of morning blew on him.

Dr. Payne, while binding the wound, stopped to make an observation. "Your Western women are magnificent! They respond like men." He glanced at Miller, but got no reply. His friend's eyes were closed and his face the colour of the patient's.

The result of the operation justified the prognosis. As soon as Belle recovered from the immediate effect of knife and anæsthetic her paralysis gradually modified, and when supper was over she was sleeping naturally, warmth and colour almost restored.

The last thing that night the two friends went in to the patient. They entered quietly, but she wakened, and when she beheld Miller a faint smile chased shadows from her lips and colour mounted her cheeks. The surgeon raised her and offered her a

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cup of water. She drank for the first time that day, then settled to sleep again.

Dr. Payne remained two days longer. Hunting and fishing were especially good, and he yielded with a youthful abandon to the delights of primitive existence.

The doctor from Santa Rosa resumed care of the patient, under direction of Dr. Payne. She steadily rallied, and when the surgeon said good-bye, she was able to murmur a few words of gratitude. He brushed back the tangle of her hair and kindly studied her face. Her latent strength of character moved him with unusual tenderness, and he bent down, touched his lips to her brow, and whispered, "Somebody's wild rose." He was thinking, however, of Miller.

In the early morning ride to the steamer the rancho quietly said to Dr. Payne: "Your coming has been a godsend. I shot her. If she should die——"

"You shot her! You!" The doctor stared; then his face lighted knowingly. "Aha!" he exclaimed, and was silent again.

"There is something intensely womanly about

her," remarked the doctor, when he spoke again. "I don't believe that even I could be shut up in the same house with her for weeks and withstand the spell."

"See here, Ned; are you taking advantage of professional opportunities?"

"Sh-sh!" whispered the doctor. "I haven't said a word. Your own conscience is betraying you." He laughed happily at his friend's discomfiture.

"But, Ned," seriously insisted Miller, "she doesn't know."

Dr. Payne laughed derisively. "Never mind, John. There's heartache ahead for both of you. It's inevitable in such cases, and howsoever the affair ends, it will end well." He laid a hand on Miller's arm and earnestly continued: "Stand by your convictions. It's soul that counts—and she has soul, gracious and enduring, I'm sure."

John did not answer. He was wondering if his regard for Belle had been so apparent that a stranger could detect it in a two days' stay under the same roof with them. He had been too anxious of late to think of anything but Belle, yet he was uncon-

scious of having shown any feeling for her other than concern.

They were nearing the steamer landing in the slough that put in from the bay. The boat was white in the sunshine, a cloud of smoke pouring from the stack. The doctor anxiously looked at his watch.

"Plenty of time," said Miller, reassuringly. "They'll wait, now that we're in sight."

"Can you accommodate Mabel, John, for two or three weeks?" The doctor spoke abruptly, a care-worn expression on his face. Miller wondered that he had not before noticed it.

"Anything wrong, Ned?" quickly asked the host.

Mrs. Payne was past forty, childless, and often separated months from her absorbed, successful and popular husband. What fancies, what questionings, will not creep into a wife's brain under such conditions?

"She's not well," answered the doctor. "It has been damp and cloudy this winter at the Presidio, and she can't throw off a depression that is alarm-

ing." He hesitated a moment. "If you could take her up here, it will be just the place. She'll be helpful—probably take a hand in your—your little—" He finished with an amused laugh.

"Then she can't come," Miller decidedly answered. But he laughed in return, and his companion fell to thumping him. "Send Mabel up as soon as you can get her here, Ned," Miller continued. "If there's anything else you want—the ranch, Gyp, Peggy, anything but Belle—ask for it."

They alighted from the wagon and fastened the horse; Miller went with his friend to the steamer's gangplank, and explained to him that the boat lay all day at the landing on Sunday, and that if Mabel came Saturday night she might remain on board, and her host would meet her Sunday morning. That would make the trip easier.

"Good, John! I'll do it. Keep her outdoors. She'll help with Belle; keep them both in the sunshine. I'll come again Christmas."

The whistle blew, the men shook hands, and the doctor crossed the plank. "Good-bye, John," he called from the deck. "Next Saturday. I pity you

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—three women under the same roof!” His laugh was not very merry.

As the boat backed into the slough, he called once more, with a wave of his hand, “Take care of my wild rose.”

CHAPTER XIX

THAT THOU MIGHTEST INSTRUCT ME

MRS. PAYNE had been more than two weeks at Casa Grande, and her personality declared itself from the first. In appearance she was the essence of good breeding, refinement evident in thought and feeling, as well as manner. Her figure was slight and girlish, her complexion fair and unusually smooth for a woman of forty.

The change she already had wrought in the household caused Miller to wonder. He had not believed it possible to drift so far from the embellishments of his early life, yet now the very dogs moved with a subdued and decorous manner. The old dwelling always had been hospitable, a rough-and-ready den; she gave the touch that made it home.

The vaqueros had regarded her coming with dismay until they found that the glowing dining-room

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still was their undisputed resort, even the women's meals being served in Belle's room. Mrs. Payne's presence among the men, after the day's labours were over, instead of driving them away, woke a latent gallantry that they themselves had not suspected. She was of a world quite unreal to these rough natures, a seeming fairyland, and they unconsciously strove to hide the contrast offered in their own existence. As if a little child had come among them, they lowered their voices, softened their laughter and, when housed for the night, changed their soggy garments for fresher raiment, yet all with a willingness that left no doubt of her charm.

Belle, too, had shared the general disquiet. She had not realised, until Mrs. Payne walked in on them, what a formidable rival the lady would be; then this dainty personality, with her domination of even the vaqueros, became a source of apprehension, and the girl, who had so long been the centre of all regard, intuitively felt that she must henceforth share attentions; resentfully at first, then gladly, when she discovered the married woman's sincerity.

Mrs. Payne had been quick to note Belle's feelings, and lost no opportunity to overcome them. The older woman was strongly attracted by the convalescent, whose isolation in the midst of all this friendliness was the first note of the girl's need. Changes were taking place in the young soul that were vital. Doubts, anxieties, hopes were straining her self-control beyond the limit of endurance.

The doctor's wife devoted herself to the winning of the girl's confidence. When indoors, she rarely was away from Belle, and took almost entire care of her during the day. She sewed for the patient, read to her, and tried every gentle means to draw out aspirations long and carefully guarded. It was not an easy task, for Belle was of a taciturn race, not given to self-study. And even had she been, the influence most moving her was one that all along she had denied, and would still deny if confronted with the facts.

Day by day the older woman's purpose became more definite, and what she failed to draw from Belle frequently was learned from Mrs. Clark. The loss of the family land; their imprisonment; their

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release through Miller's efforts; his building of their cabin; the shooting of the girl—right there came a kink in the chain of circumstances. The mother did not know why Belle had been at the barn, to be shot, and the daughter had not yet told; in fact, she always avoided speaking of the matter.

Mrs. Payne, who had been denied the blessedness of motherhood, felt her long-slumbering maternity awakening, and Belle was taking the place of her dream-child. She thought of the girl as her own, and every day asked herself what she would do if she had a daughter subjected to similar influences.

The conventional woman deemed the present situation too impossible to last after the novelty had worn off. Belle was sweet and strong, but too crude to satisfy the needs of Miller's aspiring manhood, too matured ever to be moulded into the personality to sound the depths of his affections. In the opinion of this self-sufficient woman, refinement was a matter of descent, to be acquired only after generations of custom.

That the present situation was tending toward

marriage of the young people Mrs. Payne was certain. Belle's adoration of Miller was patent to experienced eyes, and his response more than fatherly or brotherly. It was time to stop the intimacy, although she dreaded the suffering this would inflict on the girl. But she was gaining resolution to do her duty unflinchingly by the reflection that, however heart-breaking the anguish of separation might be, it was preferable to lifelong regret after marriage.

It did not occur to this loving plotter against the destiny of two lives that the soul has a test all its own; that grandeur does not lie in rank, nor polish, nor even fame; that the kingdom of heaven is only for the little ones and those who are like unto them. How could she know—this woman of fashion, society, convention, of the endless restrictions of the sordid town?

One thing, however, she did know: Belle's eyes were always following her, devouring her. The glances were disquieting, for something in them told of a longing, of a need, that she had not satisfied, that she must satisfy. As the days went by, this

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longing grew more urgent, and Mrs. Payne at last spoke about it to Miller.

He laughed with happy indulgence, and told her that Belle was putting her to the test. The girl had never known a character like hers, and not a word or act was lost. The next thing, Mrs. Payne would observe her own manner reproduced in Belle. She must be careful what she said and did.

The lady looked at him doubtfully. She was uncertain whether or not he was ridiculing her, even though the girl's almost tireless regard gave colour to his views. The woman turned away with a little pang, for she felt that the best Belle could ever do would be only imitation, and he would see through it.

Miller came near guessing Belle's motive, yet beyond her study of the older woman was a study of him, for his manner towards his latest guest was a revelation. He treated Mrs. Payne with a courtesy, a deference, that placed her above his work-a-day world. She never entered the room that he did not rise and stand until she was seated. If she dropped anything, he hastened to pick it up. In fact, she

could not move that he was not at hand to save her the slightest exertion, and to Belle he appeared the guest's abject slave rather than her well-bred equal.

It is no wonder that the convalescent's eyes carried the shadow of constant longing. She for the first time was conscious of a woman of his class and the difference between that woman and herself. She was more acutely conscious, moreover, of his manner toward a woman he regarded as his equal, and she wondered if she would have him different toward herself. Since the night he had learned that she did not set fire to his barn it had seemed to her that his manner could not be more delightful. It was not, however, what she thought, but what he thought, that disquieted her. If he preferred women like Mrs. Payne, the secret of their attractiveness must be discovered, and the girl's manner accordingly modified.

Miller was vaguely aware of the undercurrent between the two women. He was satisfied that the interest his distant relative took in Belle was not entirely impersonal, and the little drama enacting by them furnished quiet amusement. Mrs. Payne no doubt was on the alert for evidences of his regard

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for the invalid, and might interfere if she considered the matter serious enough. But he had faith in Belle's ability to protect herself.

The master of Casa Grande was growing to appreciate the danger of his present attitude toward Belle. His life was far too solitary, and some subtle quality in the girl beckoned him. What would he be doing if he made her his wife? He felt sure that she would not covet the opportunities offered by wealth and luxury to gratify personal vanities and sensual indulgence; but could she find happiness in such surroundings? She was of the people, whose aspirations were just to live, whose ideal lay in comfortable existence. He had a soul panting for the water-brooks of life, and unless her soul urged her to keep pace with him they must eventually drift and separate.

No. For her sweet sake he must put away the day-dream and send her back to the hills, as free as the birds she loved, to mate, like them, with her own kind. Mrs. Payne was probably even now preaching the same ideas to the girl.

Whatever moral reforms were progressing in

Belle, there could be no doubt of her physical improvement. She was able to leave her bed an hour or two each day, walk unaided a few steps, and her speech was almost normal again. She was sitting before a blaze of pine logs, their resinous odour perfuming the crisp air that drifted through the open door. Mrs. Payne was alone with her, giving the girl's toilet a conventional finish. She was coaxing back the natural crimp to long-tangled hair, and had brushed it low over the forehead. This little change removed the austere effect of locks drawn stiffly back and made a soft framing for the wide brow.

The city woman fetched the tray from her trunk and set it on a chair close to Belle. The girl beheld with wonder the marvels of daintiness packed in the receptacle, and with even greater fascination she watched Mrs. Payne fold and unfold her various belongings, articles that seemed to the invalid's unaccustomed eyes like fabrics of cobweb. Materials were there that she never had dreamed of—stockings and mits of silk, woollens of the fleeciest texture, cambrics and laces quite transparent. She contrasted these things with her own garments of cotton

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flour sacks, even the printed letters still evident; her home-knit stockings of stout blue wool; her gloves of heavy buckskin; and the contrast fetched a pang of regret. She had been brought, at last, in contact with luxury, and she saw how far she was removed from the women of her host's set.

Not alone the garments in the tray, but the deftness of the wearer, held the girl's attention. Mrs. Payne's hands were little and soft and exquisitely turned. They never had known toil, had been protected from even the discolouring effects of sun and wind, and the lady displayed them with pardonable vanity. Belle heretofore had gazed at them as at an infant's, without envy. The slender nails, pink, with deep moons, and carefully trimmed; the white skin, as white as the arms; the light, firm grasp of fingers—all were charming in this woman of leisure, but not to be envied by a toiler whose labour was as rough as the mountain girl's.

Perhaps the reason why Miller treated his latest guest with marked deference was because she was dainty and baby-like. Perhaps he preferred his woman to be like Mrs. Payne, with nothing to con-

sider but personal appearance and the decoration of home. She always had regarded such an existence with contempt, as unworthy the ideal of a true woman, but if he favoured it, there must be something worthy, and she should try to find it.

Belle's close study of Mrs. Payne and her belongings rather pleased the older woman, who appreciated that the motive was less curiosity than a desire to know. A way at last had opened to show the girl how hopeless it was to consider Miller as anything but a good friend—a way delicate but impressive. To give Belle an opportunity to see how she would appear when arrayed as a woman of breeding, to see that it merely was appearing, not being, would be the gentlest way to convince her of the futility of aspiring to culture and refinement.

Mrs. Payne took from her tray a lace cape, threw it around her companion's shoulders, and folded it about the full white throat.

"Did you crochet it?" innocently asked Belle.

Mrs. Payne soberly answered that she did not, that she could not, for it was rare old lace.

Belle fingered the fabric, carefully scrutinised it,

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and asked if any of Mrs. Payne's relatives had made it.

"No, Belle. I paid a hundred dollars for it."

The girl stared, but did not speak. She was thinking of the folly of paying so much for so trifling an ornament.

Mrs. Payne took next a ruby pin. Belle admired the blood-red flash of it, and lifted the hand that held it, to get the reflection. "Is that rare, too?" she asked.

Mrs. Payne answered that her father had given it to her, and that it had cost a thousand dollars.

The girl shrank from the gem. A thousand dollars for a bauble! It meant the price of a farm big enough to support in comfort an entire family.

Mrs. Payne laughed when she caught the expression on the invalid's face. "You think it extravagant? It isn't, child. We can afford these luxuries. Why shouldn't we? Money is good only for the pleasure it gives."

"So many are poor," quietly replied Belle. She hesitated to criticise the older woman's traditions.

"I know, child. The poor benefit by the use of

luxuries. They make the laces, they cut and set the gems."

The argument was unanswerable to this inexperienced girl, but it also was unsatisfactory. She must not pick a flaw in the reasoning, but it did not quiet her regret.

Mrs. Payne, however, went lightly on with her task, and fastened the lace with the ruby pin, then handed Belle a hand-glass.

The girl gravely studied her image, and shyly remarked, "I never in all my life had so much fussing over me."

Mrs. Payne stood back to catch the full effect, and replied, "If all my fussing were as successful, I'd be famous!"

Belle coloured happily. "What a change it makes! I look like a lady. I mustn't."

Mrs. Payne's face dulled a little, and Belle hastened to say that she couldn't ride the range with her hair like this.

"Of course not. But when you're in the house—when you dress for company——"

Belle smiled at the absurdity of the suggestion,

[REDACTED]

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and explained that she was in the house to eat and sleep. As for company, there might be a dance three or four times a year, and then she put on finery.

"But you're not going on this way forever, Belle." The married woman was directing her companion's thoughts toward the topic uppermost in her own mind. "Some day a man will come. Then you'll want your finery."

"Men come now," was the obtuse rejoinder, "and I don't change my fixings."

Mrs. Payne laughed. Belle had not learned the dissimulation of personal appearance. "That shows how little you care for your men acquaintances."

"I like men, Mrs. Payne." The girl's hazel eyes looked up seriously into the grey eyes. "I like to be with them, to talk to them; they're more friendly than women. But we want our home, and I'm too busy to have any courting around the house, and too tired, when night comes, to fix up."

Mrs. Payne's brain kept busily working. Her protégé was of a type unfamiliar and perplexing, and she cherished opinions which were positive; among them, indifference for conventionality, that

powerful influence for the shaping of feminine character. Inexperience and sincerity made her oblivious to polite hints of what is proper, and Mrs. Payne was forced to employ directness. She took Belle's pale face in her hands and searched deep as she asked:

"Have you never thought, have you never dreamed, of life with one man?"

The girl's frame quivered in an effort at self-control, her lips trembled, and she caught the hands of the older woman and buried her face in them. "Mrs. Payne—I don't love any one!"

At last she had reached the girl's emotions, and the reaction on herself was painful. She permitted the clinging hands to hold her own a little longer, then raised the troubled face.

"How old are you, dear?"

"Nineteen."

"You're very mature. There's time——"

"It's Mr. Miller's step," interrupted Belle, moving so that she could see the entrance.

An amused smile lit Mrs. Payne's face as she also turned to the open door. She had caught no

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sound from Miller 'til Belle had spoken. "Come in, John," she called. "I suppose you're looking for us."

"Is it an insinuation that I am hunting sunbeams?" he gallantly asked, from the doorway.

"Belle?—or me?" The hesitation was on purpose to tease.

"Both," was the ready reply. "Rosy dawn and the full light of noon." He complacently regarded his married guest. "Going to a party, Belle?"

She smiled happily, and shyly replied, "I'm practising for the man who's coming some day."

"Do I know him?" Miller's manner at once expressed interest.

Belle shook her head somewhat stiffly from the effect of the wound. "Only Mrs. Payne knows him." She glanced slyly at the lady.

The lady laughed indulgently; she concluded that femininity is constant, though types may change. "Come in, John," she cordially urged.

He declined, however. He had been passing, and yielded to the drop-in-on-you habit he latterly had acquired. He hoped to find them just as sunny at dinner-time.

But he lingered to gratify a new-found delight in Belle. The change he beheld in her appearance was striking, almost alarming. It showed at a glance how little removed, and yet how far, she was from the women of his traditions. The looping of tresses, a piece of rare lace, a costly gem, and she did not noticeably differ from her more cultured companion. Yet beyond mere appearance he saw the rugged, unspoiled girl of the hills. He somewhat regretfully wondered if he would have her like her companion; he thought he would if he could keep her always unspoiled.

When he had ridden out of the gateway, and the beat of his horse's hoofs no longer rang in the courtyard, Belle quietly remarked: "He sees everything. He noticed even the change in my hair."

Mrs. Payne was beginning to understand. Her companion's primitive spirit had yet to recognise its own emotions. Belle did not realise how fervent was her regard for Miller, how greatly he influenced her. Now was the time to rouse her consciousness, to point out what the end must be, regardless of the suffering it might cause.

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

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The older woman put a crimson ribbon about Belle's neck and knotted it to hide the scar. "There! I wonder if he'll notice what that's for? He's a man to adore daintiness."

The convalescent resented this estimate of her ideal. She remembered all he had done for her, and she knew that daintiness had been the least of her attractions. "I thought better of him," she said, with a sigh; "that he valued character above everything."

"He does, dear." She took a sprig of tollon berries from the vase and twined it in the girl's hair. "His test of character is daintiness—not in dress alone, but in voice, in manner."

"Weren't all the women dainty that he knew when he knew you?" she asked, with a note of anxiety lest her companion had judged correctly.

Mrs. Payne hastened to remove Belle's misconception, and assured her that too much attention to dress tended to make women loud in both voice and manner, to make them self-conscious. Moreover, Miller might not then have been ready to marry, even if he had met an ideal woman.

Belle could not comprehend her companion's reasoning, and declared that he was not likely to find his ideal among the women he now met.

"I'm not so certain," replied Mrs. Payne. "He may think he has found her; and marry her; and be disappointed in her; and tire of her."

Belle seriously reflected whether or not the problem was personal to her; then she remarked, "It seems to me that most married persons do that."

"Perhaps. Would you, then, marry with that prospect?"

"I don't want to marry!" Tears came to her eyes. "Life has been good to me—until my wound. But I'm content, now." She leaned back and gazed restfully at the blue sky through the window.

"But if you should marry?"

Belle turned a shining face, and answered, brightly: "He must be resolute and gentle and true; leave me in the morning with kisses, welcome me at night with both arms!"

The older woman moved a chair near Belle and sat reflectively facing her. She recalled the many who had cherished just such fancies, seldom to be

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realised. "How shall you know when you have met a man with those traits—how win him?"

The girl rocked contentedly, and replied, "I couldn't love any one else; could I?"

"That's the love of your fancy." Mrs. Payne shook her head regretfully. "In life it's different."

"How is it in life?"

"Love may come unsought, unexpected; you'll know when it challenges. But to hold it! To keep it warm and living! That must be learned from ceaseless endeavour."

Belle stopped rocking. There was a shade of longing, of disappointment, in her companion's voice that she had not caught before. Perhaps this gracious, self-contained woman was not so happy as she appeared. Perhaps her experience might hold a lesson for an untried girl. The beginner asked another question:

"How can love be held?"

"I haven't learned; I've only theories."

"What are they?"

"Be sure of love before we marry; lose our identity in our husband's afterward."

"How can we be sure of love?"

Mrs. Payne said she considered this a difficult question. She thought love might be tested by trial; by what we are willing to renounce for it; by any stress that will prove the attraction holier than mere desire.

Belle dreamily studied the fire, and asked: "Is that what is meant by saying that true love never flows smoothly?"

"Probably. Those old sayings have been shaped from countless heartaches."

Belle rocked softly. The light on her face was not the glow of the flame, but diviner. All unconscious of it, she had been sorely tried in loving; she had struggled against it, perhaps not bravely, but passionately; she had suffered for it, even to the shadow of death. The reasoning part of her did not realise the stress she had been put under, but the soul of her knew and rejoiced, for had it not met his soul face to face? And is not a glad soul the fount of happiness? She spoke at last, as if stating a final conclusion:

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"If we have to battle for it, then we can be certain we love truly."

Mrs. Payne looked kindly into the interested face. She beheld a rapture that few are permitted to see, because few that see perceive. It was a beauty too elusive for commonplace vision, yet it suggested a strength, a passion of loving, that thrilled the fettered soul of the conventional woman.

She wavered in her resolution to come between this girl and the man who, of all others, knew and would preserve the treasure of such adoration, and she wondered if divine love does outweigh all other considerations. Not for long, however, did she doubt her traditions. The habit of a lifetime cannot be eradicated in the impulse of a moment, and when she saw how elemental in both body and soul was this child of nature, she decided that Miller never could be happy with her.

It became, then, simply a consideration of permitting the affair between the young people to go on with Eden-like joyousness now, to be followed by a lifetime of suffering; or of causing anguish now, deep and hopeless as it might be, but followed

by lifelong thankfulness. She decided on the latter alternative, and said, in reply to Belle's last remark:

"We may love truly, but not wisely. We might love out of our class; would that be a sign of loving worthily?"

Belle resented the suggestion of class, and quickly answered, "In the West one is as good as another."

Mrs. Payne saw the resentment, and gently replied: "No, dear; I don't mean that. You wouldn't have Mr. Miller marry a squaw, or a negress, or a woman all her life a drudge?"

The invalid turned away her face and dejectedly leaned back. Problems that already she had been conscious of but dimly this woman now put in the light of every-day experience. Perhaps birth does set limitations. Perhaps, after all, the ecstasy of loving must pass with youth, to be followed by the toleration or indifference of maturity and marriage. The thoughts pressed wearily, and she aimlessly gazed in the glass still in her hand. One hope was left, and she diffidently asked:

"How long did it take you to learn to be dainty—and—and—?"

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

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Mrs. Payne saw the purpose of the question, and hesitated to speak the truth. "I don't know. I can't remember."

"Have you always been so?"

"I suppose I must have passed through the hoydenish period of girlhood."

"Didn't any one teach you, then?"

"Yes. Father, mother, friends. It was in the atmosphere that surrounded me."

"Is it the only way to learn?"

"I know no other, dear."

Belle rose unsteadily and, in a weak voice, said: "I'm tired, Mrs. Payne. I'll lie down, please."

Mrs. Payne arranged the bed with maternal solicitude. She had succeeded in creating doubt in Belle's mind, and the result was distressing to her as well as to the girl. She had aroused deep and tender feelings, betraying a soul that would suffer unflinchingly and grow strong from it. She consoled herself, however, by reflecting that the disappointment of anticipation is easier borne than the disappointment of realisation.

When the shades were drawn and the invalid was

covered with a bright-coloured blanket, the nurse tenderly bent to her patient, smoothed back the hair from her troubled brow and kissed her.

The girl flung her arms about the neck of the older woman and clung, sobbing. Her tears were christening a sentiment born the night of the forest fire, and nameless till to-day.

CHAPTER XX

A WELL OF LIVING WATERS

In the afternoon Miller took Mrs. Payne to ride. She was a skilled horsewoman, and on the day after her arrival had claimed Peggy for her mount. She sat her horse astride, as was Belle's custom, and thus avoided Miller's objections to a side-saddle on his favourite mare, and followed him with greater security over rough trails.

Belle stood at a window and watched the couple pass down the slope to the west. They turned and caught sight of her and waved a salute. She could but admire the trim, erect carriage of Mrs. Payne, the ease and grace of her seat, nearly as secure as her own. With all the girl's dash and freedom, even picturesqueness, on horseback, she had to confess a something in the air of the older woman that gave superior charm to her less daring riding.

She sighed, and went slowly back to her place be-

fore the fire. Her face, pressed against the bearskin rug across the back of the chair, looked white and old, but the lines of her mouth were firm; the feminine love of adornment was becoming conscious, and a resolution was forming to give more attention to personal appearance—why, it did not occur to her.

The riding companions enjoyed a pleasant comradeship, for Mrs. Payne delighted in the exercise and admired her relative. Consequently, they were away in the saddle every pleasant afternoon until after sunset, and freshness was coming back to her.

They were going quietly side by side, and he took advantage of the pace to ask: "What are you trying to do with Belle?"

His companion looked quizzically at him, and answered: "To see what she'll look like if civilised."

"Well?"

Her face was turned away as she quietly replied: "She is hopeless. You must give her up."

He coloured a little at finding how ill he had cloaked his feelings, and asked why he should give her up.

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"Oh, John! After your mother and sisters—all your womankind!"

"Is she so very different?"

"The difference between refinement and vulgarity," she replied, with sudden warmth.

Her show of resentment amused him. He suspected that she was influenced by feeling rather than judgment, and he lightly demanded: "How long have you known Belle?"

"Long enough to feel her vulgarity."

He remarked that roughness was a better word than vulgarity to describe Belle's nature, and asked if his companion had not yet detected an innate sweetness that might, under favourable circumstances, develop into refinement.

Mrs. Payne admitted that there was a deep vein of womanliness in the girl, but, notwithstanding that, he must confess that she was content to be a sordid drudge.

"Your life, Mabel, has been so different from hers that you don't appreciate her resoluteness and ambition."

"I know she's poor, but she's attractive, and in

this land of few women she might easily marry a rich man of her own class, and be somebody, had she the spirit."

He softly laughed, and declared that because Belle determined to work up unaided was why he approved of her. It implied energy, self-reliance and, above all, honesty. The Clark family had been prosperous before he put them off his land. He told this with evident regret.

Here was another complication in the young people's lives, and his view of it must be reported to Mrs. Payne. After she had heard the story, she called Miller Belle's Nemesis, and insisted that his feeling was largely contrition—first for putting her off his land, then for the shooting of her.

"Contrition may have drawn me to her," he admitted; "but I found her true, strong and tender."

"I'm afraid you're in love, John," she declared, without ridicule, "and, like all lovers, you idealise."

"What a romancer you are! Can't you see she possesses restlessness and energy that will hew a way to distinction? Half your prosperous city men

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began life as obscure as Belle; half your society leaders were reared on the farm."

"Then breeding is of no consequence?"

"Not without selection."

She wanted to know what process of selection Miller would rely on to develop Belle.

"Environment."

It was now her turn to be amused, and she asked what evidence he had that Belle would be unusually susceptible to environment.

In his own mind, he had been over the proof more than once, and he quickly replied that, for one thing, she was superior to her backwoods associates, and, though illiterate, by no means ignorant.

"Idealising again," observed Mrs. Payne, to whom ignorance and illiteracy were nothing but synonymous.

"Try her yourself, Mabel. There isn't a bird frequenting these woods that she can't describe, even to the number and colour of its eggs and what it feeds its young. There isn't a tree she can't point out."

The expression of amusement was brightening on his companion's face.

"There isn't a flower she doesn't know," he went on, "even to the week it should first bloom. They're all hers, since she has names for them—baby-blue eyes, black-eyed Susans, Johnny jump-ups; here and there a Spanish name—copa de oro for poppy, tollon for your Christmas berries. And the shy beauties that grow in out-of-the-way places—tiger lilies, anemones, azaleas—she'll take you to all of them."

"She should write a book, John."

"Her knowledge of natural history would fill a book," he blandly declared, "and no mean contribution to science, either."

Mrs. Payne smiled at his enthusiasm. She told him that all he had said only proved Belle still a child, with all a child's ardour.

"Yes," he sighed; "we were all children once, with a love of simple things. Most of us lose our artlessness long before we reach her age—the getting of many dollars or costly gowns ranking higher in our ambitions.

Mrs. Payne had not heard all he said, and absently responded: "Yes; I suppose so. But I fear it is late to attempt the refining of her," she concluded, with a touch of obstinacy.

"Perhaps, Mabel. You startled me to-day, however, by the change you made in her appearance."

"It was only appearance. Underneath her adornments was the rough Belle."

He suggested that if the girl were more frequently adorned the roughness might gradually disappear.

Mrs. Payne still insisted that Belle lacked native refinement, and was too old to acquire it.

He was disposed to change the topic, but it occurred to him that his companion had been discussing the matter with the invalid, and, lest the more experienced woman's opinions prevail, he decided to attack them, and introduce, if possible, an element of doubt in her tradition-warped mind. In a tone of banter, he asked:

"What is refinement, Mabel?"

She laughed, and replied: "As if you didn't know!"

"Perhaps our ideas differ," he solemnly rejoined.

She said she did not believe it; that to both, refinement meant the graciousness resulting from good breeding.

"Isn't that polish?" he asked, the suspicion of a smile on his lips.

"All refined persons are polished."

"Are all the polished refined?"

"You're trying to trap me," she declared, with an air of being too shrewd for that.

"I'm as serious as a meeting-house."

"Oh! If you're going to pin me down, I suppose there are comparatively few refined persons."

He removed his hat and ran his fingers through his thick, wavy hair, deep content in his face. "What makes the few refined?"

She said she didn't know—hadn't thought. She threw a swift glance of admiration at him, and added: "You're refined, John. I suppose you'll claim it's soul."

He looked the amusement he felt, leaned over, and laid his hand on hers.

She deftly avoided him, and declared that she was not to be caressed into flying in the face of all her

traditions. And even if Belle had a soul, he wouldn't claim she was refined!

"No. Not yet. But if she has a soul, she has something to refine. Perhaps she needs fire."

"Poor child! Is there no other way?" A catch was in Mrs. Payne's voice as she beseechingly turned to him. "You're not going to be the fire?"

"Not consciously."

"But think of the hold you are gaining on her affections!"

He calmly answered that, after all, affection is the test of fitness.

"But you want something besides that," persisted Mrs. Payne, more baffled than ever by his manner.

"What, for instance?"

"Why, style, wit, accomplishment—many things!" she irritably answered.

"Then, how is it that men desert such women for those your sex term doll-faces—the clinging, dependent characters?"

"Because all men are fools!" she indignantly replied. She had never belonged to the doll-face class.

"No, no! Liars is the word St. Paul used."

The crisp air, the swinging pace of the horses, the whistle of larks aslant the setting sun, the quail-calls—all lent joy to their outing; and she laughed with him, as she teasingly asked: "You tell me why your sex admires the simpletons in ours. You appear to have given it much study."

"Haven't you learned," he demanded, with assumed superiority, "that women with opinions are not near so charming as those that listen in rapt admiration to our pet theories, our marvellous discoveries?"

"Men are so vain!"

"And when we are ill," he continued, "the clinging women know what to do. They never make disagreeable remarks about where we were last night, or what we were about; they do things with the gentlest of touches, the softest of voices. And when we growl and scold, they don't answer back."

"Men are so selfish!"

"But the real explanation, Mabel," he more seriously went on, ignoring her thrusts, "is that clinging women are maternal. On such abstractions, men



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reason no more than horses. But they have instincts."

"You don't consider Belle a clinging woman?"

"No. Maternal."

"The everlasting maternal!" she acidly retorted.

"I thought you had a higher ideal, John."

"Wait until you know Belle better," he drawlingly suggested, "before you pass final judgment. There she is at the window, looking for us."

"Us!" repeated Mrs. Payne, and softly laughed.

The girl at the window waved to them, her face giving back the glow of the western sky.

CHAPTER XXI

WHAT IS THY BELOVED?

IN clinging vestments of mist, Christmas Day crept down from the eastern hills. The opaque sky pressed lightly on the olive-coloured earth, sombre and silent as death, a grave-like chill in the air.

At the big house the sunlight of a hundred years leaped soundingly from the dining-room fireplace and glowed cheerily from the hearth in Belle's room. Crimson tollon berries mingled with evergreens to decorate the walls, and the warmth was redolent of redwood boughs. What mattered weather when comradeship vibrated from a dozen throats?

The vaqueros, lounging about the crackling blaze, had been their morning rounds; the well-fed cattle in the corrals chewed the cud of brute content; the saddled ponies, with slack cinches and bridles dangling from pommels, stood comfortably stalled, each head in a manger bursting with meadow hay; even

the dogs at their master's feet stretched blissfully round the penetrating warmth. And the man in whose heart was a place for every one of them sat apart and silent, peace and gladness lighting his face like an unspoken benediction.

Manuel was master of the hour. The costume worn the day Belle renewed health and hope had been donned, and Mrs. Payne proclaimed him "chef." She and Mrs. Clark were self-appointed aids to the chef, and the three kept busy about the big stove hidden by a multitude of utensils, the cheer to follow made evident by appetising odours floating upward in a cloud of vapours. The doctor, who had returned to complete his holiday, was ever ready with caution lest many cooks spoil the broth. Yet the browning joints, the steaming puddings, the butter-coloured pies, in spite of the caution, or because of it, promised an epicurean feast.

The sun was an hour above the hills when the more leisurely members of the family took the places at table of the sated vaqueros. Belle's brother Wash made the company six—a merry half-dozen. To three of them the meal seemed a primitive repast,

but keen appetites and good-fellowship supplied missing garnishments. To the other three it seemed a feast the gods themselves might linger over.

Manuel proved as adept in the dispensing of good things as in the preparing of them. He glided swiftly about the table, attentive to all, but especially solicitous of Belle. He found time, however, to reply with gentle courtesy to the compliments lavished on the cooking, and felt generously repaid for his efforts.

Dr. Payne had taken a great liking to the old servitor, who, with a grace that barred familiarity, was as unspoiled as a child. The professional man delighted in the sweet humour, the quiet philosophy, of the Mexican's broken English, and to-day the cook was called upon to entertain as well as to feast, his humour in keeping with his impulses.

"I suppose you'll be glad when the women go away?" remarked the doctor, to test Manuel's gallantry.

"No, señor; dam es-sorry. Old house be like Arizona in frost; hear man whistle one mile!"

"They must make lots of trouble?"

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

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"Oh, yes." The inflection was rising and non-committal. "Me been marry, meself."

"Domestic troubles may be borne, eh?" The questioner smiled affably. "But you wouldn't have Mr. Miller fetch a wife here?"

"Me no know." A sudden depression clouded the old man's manner. "Been theenking—no like go 'way."

"What!" exclaimed the doctor, in feigned surprise; "he hasn't said anything?"

"No. Meestah Jone no talk." Manuel sagely shook his head. "Pero me es-see heem lookeeng, lookeeng, all time lookeeng la señorita."

The speech was greeted with noisy merriment. It unfurled telltale banners in la señorita's cheeks and caused John to move uneasily.

"See here, Ned"—the host spoke protestingly—"don't you think——"

The tormentor ignored the discomfort he was causing two of the company, and interrupted the host by saying to Manuel: "Mr. Miller doesn't see what his looking has to do with it; neither do I. I, also, like to look at the señorita."

"Oh, yes; you dam' es-smart man." The cook stated a fact without attempting to compliment. "Pero me savey es-something—been marry three times!"

"Here! here!" called the doctor, choking with laughter; and Mrs. Payne, catching the opportunity to divert the personality of the dialogue, hastened to inquire about Manuel's domestic experiences.

With the unconsciousness of a child, he deliberately began his story. "Me be es-soldier bery young; nineteen—go Pueblo Villages, New Mexico. Next year me captain; old captain go back Mexico. Me es-stay three, four years—learn es-speak Pueblo. Leetle more puddeeng, señorita? No? Bery es-sweet. Pueblo chief have dam' fine girl—'bout es-sixteen. Me lookeeng heem—long time look-eeng."

He paused as if memory had run back again to the Pueblo Villages, with the Indian maiden; then his face suddenly lighted. "By-an'-by, es-she look-eeng, too. Me like es-speak; heem run 'way—all time run 'way. Pero one time no run fast 'nough.

[REDACTED]

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Es-she papa come queek, es-say, ‘What for?’ Me say, ‘Me woman, me marry.’ Pueblo girl three year me wife; three year heaven.”

He walked slowly to the stove, his shoulders bent, his head shaking. After he had replenished the fire, he gazed through the eastern windows, far beyond the hills, still sombre under the grey sky, toward the land of his lost wife. When he walked back to the table, he stood gravely aloof, his wrinkled fingers grasping his chin. The little party gossipped cheerfully, but he heard nothing; the mist of recollection was in his eyes.

“Manuel,” gently called Mrs. Payne, “how about the others?”

“Next time me marry,” he pleasantly continued, “me leeving in Mexico. Me wife reech girl, bery handsome; bery good es-singing, dancing, riding; good clothes. Es-she all time like talk men—plenty men. Be marry one year. Es-she cross; all time talking. ‘You no make money; no dance; no es-sing; all time es-stay home.’ Me——”

“Why did she marry you?” interrupted Mrs. Payne.

"Me no know. Me dam' fine-lookeeng es-soldier."

He joined in the laugh he had raised, not knowing it was the modesty of his assumption that they enjoyed.

"Well," he continued, returning to his muttons, "me dam' glad war come; me go fighting one year. Me dam' glad come back; like es-see wife. Pero no find heem; es-she go 'way 'nother fallah. Me es-say, 'Go to devil.' Next day me es-saying, 'Keel heem.' Me find 'em; es-she cry, es-say, 'Keel me, no keel heem'; heem es-say nothing. Pah!" exclaimed the old soldier, his voice full of disdain. "Me es-say, 'You two womans; no keel womans.' Me get out."

The expression on the speaker's face told that the recollection of those early days still could bring unhappiness, but the accustomed smile crept back again, and he continued his autobiography:

"Poco tiempo, me be quartermaster Mexico; no can es-stay. Es-sometimes me friends es-sorry for me, es-sometimes laughing. By-an'-by es-soldiers go to San Diego, California; me go, too. Two, three

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year more, me marry California girl—leave army.
Es-she papa get beeg ranch; give heem plenty land,
plenty cow, plenty horse. Me ranchero twenty year
—can es-stand heem no more; go 'way. You es-see?
me marry three times meself."

He walked away as if his tale were ended. Mrs. Payne's glance followed him questioningly. He made no sign of continuing the narrative, and she called to him:

“Is your last wife alive?”

"Me theenk es-so."

The doctor looked amused. He knew his wife would not be satisfied with this non-committal answer.

"But, Manuel," she persisted, "how long since you saw her?"

"Five, seex year." He walked to the window and watched the sun drop below the hills.

There was mischief in the doctor's expression. His wife saw it, and she determined to learn the particulars of Manuel's last venture, even if she must be somewhat rude.

“Come here, Manuel!” she called.

Her tone of command brought a smile to her victim's face, as he obediently went back.

"Your story isn't complete. Why haven't you seen number three for so long?" The look of friendliness that invites men's confidences was in her eyes.

"Oh, me wife dam' fine woman!" He was on the defensive; yet, gallant as he was, he felt that his questioner sooner or later would get at the truth. He determined to say only kind things of the absent one, and added: "Es-she bery reech, bery hard-working, bery, bery—es-sharp." He sighed his relief; he had found the fit word without compromising the lady.

Mrs. Payne was satisfied, however. The word "sharp" explained to her, to the doctor, to Miller, why this husband "no more can es-stand heem." The guileless face of the old man stamped a character to submit for twenty years to be treated in his own household as little better than a hired man. Yet the lines about his lips told that when he turned in his tracks he would never face about again.

"I'll bet," declared Miller, breaking the silence, "that you loved the little Indian girl best?"

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The much-married man shook his head, and musingly answered: "Eef es-she leeveng, me no cooking, now."

Belle looked shyly at Miller, then diffidently asked: "Why did you love her best, Manuel?"

He laughed with embarrassment at the close scrutiny of his domestic relations, shrugged his shoulders, and answered simply: "Because es-she love me."

"Love thy neighbour as thyself," musingly observed the doctor, drumming on the table. "If, however, thy neighbour is thy wife"—he smiled a little foolishly—"obedience to the first and great commandment wouldn't be highly creditable; would it? But if thy wife cherish also this same command"—he made a motion as if waving back some invisible thing—"Paradise! what need of it?"

Every one, to-day, appeared to have forgotten rank for love except Mrs. Payne. She had asserted twice since her arrival at Casa Grande that one should marry in his own class. This bit of the old soldier's experience cast some doubt on her theory, and she returned to the original argument.

"But, Manuel, if the Indian wife had lived, wouldn't she have tired as the others did?"

Again he shrugged his shoulders, and answered: "Who knows?"

"What do you think?" The lady must have a decided answer.

"Me theenk no. Vaquero savey eef wild horse good for es-saddle first time, ride heem. Eef good first time, good all time. Man, woman—all es-same horse."

"I don't know about that," protested Mrs. Payne. In her experience the selection of husband or wife had been a matter of chance.

"Me know," confidently asserted Manuel. He would prove it by an example that even Mrs. Payne could understand. "Peggy dam' fine es-saddle-horse. Me theenk es-she good first time Meestah Jone ride heem; good all time."

"Yes, Manuel," said Miller; "the first time I tried her I knew that every ounce of her was horse."

"Indian girl all es-same. Es-she love heem papa, heem mamma, love me—everybody. Es-she bery gentle, bery kind."



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The majority tacitly approved of Manuel's conclusion, reached through personal experience, that his first wife's love would have borne the test of time.

- The doctor rose from the table and stood observing Belle. "We haven't had a toast," he remarked. "I offer this—drunk in water: 'The little Indian girl; God bless her memory for keeping in one man's regard a tender spot for all women.' "

They drank in silence, their glances following the doctor's, still fixed on Belle. She was far away with the Indian wife, a primitive, almost naked character, who had brought nothing to her husband but love. *That* she had given joyously, lavishly, and through all his varied existence it was the one thing that clung to him—was now the only thing his memory cherished.

When she looked up and found herself the centre of their regard, a sweet confusion flooded her cheeks with roses.



CHAPTER XXII

AND NONE WOULD DESPISE ME

NEW YEAR'S DAY at Casa Grande smiled on the same little group that had celebrated Christmas. Dr. Payne did not weary of their simple, unconventional life, every hour adding to his delight, and he still lingered.

Although there were no telegraph lines, nor had a post-route been established, the fame of the surgeon ran up and down the valley, from the little village of Santa Rosa to the steamer landing at the Embarcadero. More than one passer-by took advantage of the holiday and its established custom to stop at the old place, the celebrated guest proving as strong an attraction as the bowl of egg-nogg on the dining-room table.

Since Miller had bought the ranch his house had gained the reputation of a mansion of many wel-

comes; somewhat rough and primitive, perhaps; yet all who travelled that way considered themselves invited. A woman now had come, and everywhere were softness and femininity; the finer hospitality none the less hearty, however.

The doctor and his host had been riding all morning. They had wandered indifferently under a clear blue sky in the crisp sunlight, two care-free companions. They had hung across corral fences and watched the logy cattle. They had stood on the banks of Aguas Frias, the first run of salmon-trout flashing by fearlessly. They turned in their saddles, at the top of the hills, to gaze across the little valley, on the olive-green mantle of the folding earth dropping lightly down.

When the horsemen got back to the dwelling the sheriff was one of the visitors. He had on company clothing, and likewise company manners, evidence that his presence was unofficial. It was the first time Mrs. Payne had met him, and he had not long been in the house before she concluded that his was not necessarily a New Year's call.

Bailey was a man of infrequent emotions, and

when they were roused he was too unconscious to hide them. He had not seen Belle for days, and as soon as she came into the room an unusual charm in her appearance deeply moved him, and he made no effort to veil his admiration—to her annoyance and Mrs. Payne's satisfaction.

The married woman had at last found a happy solution of the problem long on her mind. Belle and Bailey were of the same class. He certainly was prosperous, and had a commanding personality. These two would be better mated than Belle and Miller, a conclusion that gained for the newcomer Mrs. Payne's sympathy, and her influence in securing an interview with Belle, which the young lady very deftly cut short.

All this had happened before Miller returned. When Mrs. Payne saw the two men together, and observed their manner toward the girl, a sense of having blundered dismayed the older woman, for Bailey's roughness brought Belle's innate sweetness into glaring contrast, gave it a prominence that had not been evident in association with Miller. Mrs. Payne therefore decided to interfere no further in

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the sheriff's behalf until she more carefully had studied his character.

Dinner was served late, and the company lingered in the big, cheery room, after the meal was over, until the sun slanted through the western windows. A clatter of hoofs in the courtyard, the barking of dogs, took all to the open door, and they saw a half-dozen horsemen lifting a companion from his saddle.

The man had ridden, with unconscious pluck, five miles from the squatter settlement in Dry Creek Valley. His eyes were staring, his face white, and on the towel roughly bound about his head was a ragged, crimson stain. They took him before the glowing hearth and set him in a comfortable chair, faint and shivering from cold and pain. The doctor gave a stimulant, drew off the coarse boots, covered him with a blanket, and soon had him easier.

Then the physician turned to the men who had fetched the patient and asked the cause of the wound. Belle's presence gave them confidence, and they gathered about her with a gladness apparent to any reader of signs. The man had been wounded in a drunken quarrel while attempting to protect a neigh-

bour from her husband's fist. They had been celebrating the new year, and the accident had ended the spree and sobered the revellers—all but Bill Scott, the one who had done the shooting.

"Bill Scott's an idle, worthless bully," said Belle, "and he can thank his wife for having even a home. She would be well rid of him."

"Served me right," declared the wounded man, speaking weakly, but without resentment. "I had no call to put in my lip."

"Come, friend," protested the doctor; "you did a gallant deed, one worthy of a man."

"I'm not regretting that, doc," cheerfully replied the patient. "If the like of me keep out of family jars, the like of Mrs. Scott wouldn't live with such men."

"They must marry," suggested Mrs. Payne. She spoke with a rising inflection, however, as if there might be an alternative.

"Yes," drily admitted the wounded man; "mules, or a wench with a fist as heavy as a mule's foot. Some one as 'll throw 'em out when drunk." In this man's philosophy there must be selection be-

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tween members of even the same class, and Mrs. Payne was dimly conscious that domestic complications are not wholly dependent on questions of breeding.

"Bill Scott's wife might be somebody if she wasn't tied to him," declared Belle. "Even as it is, she's the whole outfit!"

"I don't see why she stays with that skunk." The wounded man spoke irritably, and unconsciously put his hand to his head.

Belle's face expressed disgust as she replied: "We all know why. She's good and faithful, and he'll be as meek as Moses for the next month. She'll forgive him, as she always does. Are you in pain?"

"Come, now, clear out!" the doctor good-naturedly ordered. "We're getting our man worked up over this, and I must see to his hurt."

The wound was serious, but not dangerous. The bullet had grazed the skull, without fracturing it, and some stitches had to be taken in the scalp. While the doctor was dressing the injury, he was surrounded with sympathetic helpers, Miller, Manuel, Belle, Mrs. Clark, each serving with kindly office or

kindlier sentiment. Bailey sat apart, and for once watched the others, without comment.

Under their soothing influence the patient soon cheered up and humorously described the morning's dissipation. Life on the frontier is too natural, too childlike, to be long depressed. Sympathy is a full, deep current, on which float lightly unspoiled emotions.

The neighbours waited contentedly for the operation to be over, and smoked familiar cigarettes with the vaqueros who lounged about the courtyard. The friendly attitude of the two factions, mingling thus for the first time in months, gave no hint of past strained relations. The fire of resentment, if it smouldered, was overlaid by the ashes of more imminent necessity, and as long as their comrade was in no present danger, their errand of distress became part of the day's celebration.

The wounded squatter, with scalp well patched and head freshly bandaged, rose unsteadily to depart. Miller saw at a glance that the man was unfit to ride to his own home, and sent his companions away without him.

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"Stay around a day or two; wait till your pins stiffen a bit," was the ranchero's invitation. He was at last learning these men, was finding out how far he could tax their gratitude.

The newcomer weakly protested. His intuitions told him that he was an intruder, that to stay would be to accept a kindness made necessary by his own stupidity. Yet he was sorely wounded, and the comfort, the hospitality, roused a longing for one night's rest in this stronghold of helpfulness, and he yielded.

They fetched a cot, and laid him, clean and peaceful, in the dark. The last he remembered was voices of women sounding, far away, a low, sweet lullaby, maternal, soothing. He was again a child, simple, unspoiled, without care or sorrow.

"I suppose you'll arrest the man who did the shooting, Mr. Bailey?" asked Mrs. Payne, after the family had gathered again. She concluded that an example must be set.

The sheriff answered easily that he felt no call to arrest any one.

"No call! And a man wounded almost to death!"

Bailey explained that the law considered the com-

munity as well as the individual, and in this case the community would profit, because Scott would have to get out.

"Scott get out!" This time it was Belle whose indignation was roused. "You couldn't drag him out with a saddle-horse."

"We'll see," confidently replied Bailey. "When he winged that man for protecting his wife he played his last card; she'll throw him out. I know these people."

The note of assurance in the sheriff's speech irritated Belle, who gave vent to her mood by a quick retort: "Oh, yes, Sam Bailey; you know so much!"

He backed up to the fireplace and spread his hands to the warmth. "I can prove that I'm right," he banteringly affirmed. "Our wounded friend was quite mild while you were patching him up; but when he gets well, if Scott even winks at him there 'll be a funeral in Dry Creek. No man as big a coward as Scott can long stand to be terrorised that way, and he'll get out. Am I right?"

"You're always right," said Belle, but her manner did not carry the approval of her words.

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Bailey laughed, and picked up his hat. His visit was disappointing, for he had been all day under restraint. Something had changed in the old house, in Belle, and he laid it to Mrs. Payne's door. He was disposed to resent as an intrusion the coming of this latest guest, and the more he studied her the more certain he felt that she was planning to win Belle to Miller. No doubt, Miller was conscious of the scheme, and a new emotion stirred Bailey. If they proposed to cut him out of his rightful place with the girl, he, too, could play at that game, and for the first time he began to plot against his host. "Good-bye," he blandly said to Belle, as he turned toward the door; "I'd better go before you row with me. Good-bye, all."

It was long after dark when the family quieted down from the excitements of the day. The vaqueros were smoking and chatting in the dining-room, where Manuel was finishing with his dishes; the others were in Belle's room. A dog roused from between the men's feet and gave a short, muffled bark. Another and another became alert, then all charged for the court-

yard; the men sprang after, calling them in threatening tones.

Miller and the doctor came into the dining-room as the vaqueros re-entered, escorting a woman of middle age, shrunken and bony from overwork. Her garments were poor, almost mean, and her face thin and sad; yet her eyes were intelligent and resolute.

"I am Mrs. Scott," she simply said.

Belle heard the voice and ran out, took the wasted figure in her arms and kissed her. The older woman clung a moment to the girl, as if for protection, then gently pushed her back. The frontier may go insane if the fiercer emotions be roused; but if the tender, it is at once ashamed.

When they had seated this visitor before the fire in Belle's room, the friendliness of the genial group slowly relaxed the tension of her months of repression, and she found relief in talking. They listened interestedly till she had freed her mind of resentment and bitterness.

She had left her husband in bed to sleep himself sober; her two children she had housed for the night with neighbours; then she had felt free to follow

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her instinct—that was for refuge. At Casa Grande were Belle, always resolute and helpful, and Miller, the embodiment of kindness, notwithstanding past feuds. Comfort, peace, sympathy, all attracted her to the big house. This was the first time she had stepped inside these walls, and the reality was even more than she had pictured.

Her life had been steep and rough; here was a resting-place where she might renew courage and gather strength and resolution, if only for a night. Just now, she could think of but one purpose—to get rid of her husband. Like a mastering passion, it quivered from every cell in her being. Yet how should she? She asked them the question humbly as a child, almost helplessly.

The others looked to Miller for answer, and, for once, the master of Casa Grande was not ready. To gain time, he would have the woman stay with them for the night; there was a couch where she could sleep secure among friends. He would have her wait a little; she must be worn with the mental struggle she had been through. A change of thought, a change of circumstance, and the world would be

fairer again. Above all, she must decide her own actions; it would be wiser to do nothing until she was certain of her convictions.

Mrs. Payne was not satisfied. "You must remember, John, that Mrs. Scott is a woman. She needs advice."

Miller good-naturedly shook his head. "If she needs advice or approval, she would better remain as she has been."

"You are cruel!"

"Each is his own world," he gently replied. "No one can say what another should do—unless one knows every quivering emotion of the other."

"But, John, those who have been in the world, who have seen life, know what's right, what's wrong, better than those who haven't."

He smiled kindly at his impulsive guest and her throbbing sympathy. "Yes; for themselves. After all, the limit of worldly knowledge is to know what is right, each for himself."

"Would you have this woman wear out her life for that brute?"

"Oh, no, knight-errantess! I'd have her wait

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until she will submit no longer; then her own resolution will point the way."

"That means you won't help her?" said Mrs. Payne, disappointment evident in face and voice.

"If she needs money, land, a horse, a cow, I might be persuaded. But advice—I'm not sure, myself, so I'll keep that without price."

"Only a word, John."

"If she needs my word, she lacks conviction." He glanced compassionately at the careworn woman. "We do many things from impulse—usually to regret them. Conviction alone gives courage."

"You're generally right, John." Mrs. Payne looked humbly at him, and rose from her chair. "Are you disappointed, Mrs. Scott?"

An answer was not immediately given. The woman's face was toward the fire, her sunken eyes turned to the glowing coals as if studying destiny. When she looked up her mouth was resolute. "No; not exactly. I'm sure I'll never live with him again."

Miller rose, also. "Your convictions will give you courage to enforce them," he hopefully affirmed.

"A good night's rest will be more to you than advice."

Mrs. Payne lingered to help with the couch and do what she could for the comfort of the other women. When she came softly into the unlighted dining-room, Miller was alone by the fireside, the dogs stretched comfortably about him. The logs had burned to a bed of coals, and the ruddy glow showed his well-knit figure like burnished copper. His attitude suggested weariness, not so much physical as spiritual. The man of large sympathy, ever ready to give unstintingly of it, found his soul nearly drained. All were taking from him, none repaying, and the thought sometimes made him desolate. When he looked up, there was a wistfulness in the strong face that made her yearn over the solitary man, for she felt his loneliness.

He set a chair for her near the fire.

"No, John; it's late. But I have news for you. It appears that Belle has another brother, Tom."

"Yes. He disappeared just after the big fire."

"He went to Santa Barbara," she continued, "on a cattle range, where he still is. Belle must have

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suspected him of taking part in the firing of your barn, for he was there that night—and she was shot for it, poor girl! He didn't, however. Mrs. Scott gave no names, but it's not difficult to guess, now, who did the mischief, and Belle and her mother were greatly relieved to hear of Tom's innocence."

Miller sat thinking of the night the girl was wounded, and many things became clear, each new disclosure adding to the patient's credit. "A case of self-sacrifice on the altar of friendship, eh?" he remarked. "The boy wouldn't betray the guilty man, for the sake of the man's family. Belle or Wash might easily have done such a thing, but Tom—I didn't suspect it. Runs in the family. Good stuff, that, Mabel."

But Mrs. Payne had also fallen to dreaming. Presently she laid a hand on his shoulder. "To think," she said, "that girl might some day become like that woman!"

He understood, although the process of reasoning by which she arrived at her conclusion had not been explained. He said, however, that he did not wholly agree with his guest; the girl had a different temper.

"Yes," admitted Mrs. Payne; "she's courageous and sympathetic, and when I saw her with Mr. Bailey to-day I was impressed by her superiority to her own class. And, John"—there was an expression of intense satisfaction on the speaker's face—"you should have seen her turn him down. I've been chuckling to myself ever since. She'll learn fast."

He affably reminded her of his having said that Belle was putting her to the test. He thought the girl had a good model.

"Oh, dear!" exclaimed the model, "I don't know whether I'm good or bad. I thought I knew just what to do when I arrived. Now, I'm quite at a loss."

"Why, Mabel," he said, rising, "you astonish me!"

"I don't care, John Miller; you've been laughing at me ever since I came here."

"Laughing at you!—I?"

"Yes, you have. You've been laughing in your sleeve." The mention of laughter recalled Bailey again, and she took a new turn. "I thought I had

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found just the man for Belle when I met Mr. Bailey,
but I believe I don't like him."

"Go to bed, little schemer. Leave something for
another day." He lighted a candle for her.

"Good-night, John. Do you think you could be
satisfied with her love?" The look she gave him
was sweet and wistful.

For answer, he pressed to his lips the soft, cool
hand he held in his, and kindly said, "Good-night."

CHAPTER XXIII

IF A MAN WOULD GIVE ALL FOR LOVE

THE day after New Year's, Dr. Payne found on the breakfast-table a summons that brought to an end his visit at Casa Grande. He read aloud that much of the letter, and all fell to discussing plans for the parting. It was decided that Miller should drive the surgeon and his wife, in the afternoon, to Sonoma, where they might remain overnight, and not have to rise before daylight next morning, to be on hand for the early departure of the steamer to San Francisco.

Belle had listened to the doctor's announcement with no outward sign of distress; but her heart was labouring, and her breath came as if a band were tightening about her chest. The hour she had dreaded was here, and she must at last say good-bye. What the parting meant suddenly flashed upon her,

and she knew how she had grown to depend on the master of Aguas Frias.

When she felt her voice steady, she quietly said that they, too, would leave at the same time. The announcement fetched a lull in the conversation, the silence more eloquent of regret than any words could be.

"Do you think it safe, Ned?" asked Miller.

The doctor did not look at Belle, but he caught her troubled expression, and guessed the motive that prompted her to leave so soon. "She has improved fast," he answered, "and if she will remember to be careful——"

Miller urged no further objections. He could not very well obtrude his own regrets, and he was too absorbed by them to divine the girl's motive; so he acquiesced with evident disappointment.

"How soon, John," asked the doctor, a twinkle in his eye, "do you consider it will be safe?"

"About a year," was the indolent answer.

"Why not a hundred?"

"Very well, then—a hundred."

"My dear boy," said the doctor, solemnly rising,
"I suggest that you consult the patient."

But when the doctor got up, the patient left and went into the living-room, her mother and Miller following her.

The surgeon proposed to his wife, as soon as they were alone, that she stay a week or two longer, and perhaps Belle would remain with her.

"Are you tired of me, Ned?" she asked.

His manner expressed surprise, and at the same time embarrassment. He must answer something, however, for she waited expectantly. "I supposed, all along, it was the other way, Mabel."

She went quickly to him and caught his arm with both her hands. "Oh, Ned, there's nothing in this world worth while but you!"

He drew her to him and smoothed the hair from her brow. Streakings of silver were coming in the gold, and her eyes shone with unaccustomed pleading, but her lips curved invitingly. "Did you have to come to Casa Grande to discover that?"

"I've discovered many things at Casa Grande, dear. Kiss me."

Husband and wife, his arm about her, passed out the front door and along the road to the feeding-sheds. Belle stood at a window and watched them. She never before had seen him caress his wife, and the spirit of romance, ever alert in the girl, weaved pictures of the impulses that had caused this sudden change. Love, then, is a fountain, to run dry if not replenished by love, and yet never so dry as not to flow again if abundantly fed.

The girl's thoughts wandered from the doctor and his wife to Miller. Why had the professional man suggested that his host question the patient as to the time of her leaving? Had all of them observed her growing affection for the ranchero? She pressed both hands to her heart to still its throbbing, for her dreams were taking the forms of realities, and she stood in the first sunburst of the discovery. It must not be. She had not yet forgiven the wrongs he had done, and even if she could forgive, she could not satisfy him; she was not worthy of him.

Her purpose had been formed in the spirit of self-sacrifice that proved the deep abnegation of her love. She, like all ardent souls, was forgetting her own

longing in the divine passion he had wakened, and which at last she was conscious of.

She resolved, therefore, to leave Casa Grande before he had found out her love for him. She would steal away while he was gone, run off and hide in some quiet place, and die—anything to escape telling him good-bye, letting him see the emotion that was unnerving her. She went back to her deserted chamber, flung herself beside the bed, and asked for strength to carry out the plan now submerging her in a flood of tears that would not break.

Mrs. Payne, the joy of loving deeply stirring her again, found the girl packing with feverish eagerness. She walked to the bureau and covertly observed Belle, but did not speak for some time. She at last discovered the reason for this disorderly gathering up of the family belongings, and softly asked :

“Packing, Belle?”

The girl only nodded in answer.

“I thought you’d help me—our time is short.”

Belle neither paused nor looked up.

“Must you leave when we go?”

"Yes." Belle kept her face away from the questioner.

"You needn't. You'll have the house to yourselves to-night, and can take your own time. Then in the morning you will start refreshed."

Belle silently persevered.

Mrs. Payne went to the kneeling figure and laid a hand on her. The touch was a caress, and Belle looked up, at last—rose and clasped the fingers lying on her shoulder.

"It's time, Mrs. Payne. We've stayed too long, and Mr. Miller has been so kind."

"But a day or two more will make no difference."

"We must go, Mrs. Payne—now."

"Have you told John?"

"I can't tell him! We'll be gone when he gets back. Please don't stop me." Belle had spoken fast, and was shaking.

Mrs. Payne drew the quivering figure to her and held the girl close—two women, each beloved. Belle's breath came distressfully, and she leaned to the older woman, who gently asked if she realised how deeply her stealing away would pain Mr. Miller.

Belle's only answer was to cling the tighter.

"John has been proud of your courage, dear."

"I can't tell him good-bye, Mrs. Payne—I can't!

He sees so much, he'll know—he'll be sure—— You tell, when you leave him to-morrow morning."

Mrs. Payne softly laughed. "You foolish child!

He would ride straight to your house, if I did."

"But I'm not worthy."

The older woman's face rested caressingly on the girl's flushed cheek, and her head shook disapprovingly, for the memory of her husband's arm about her waist still lingered.

"But you think so. You tried to show me——"

"Never mind, now, dear. I shouldn't have interfered. It's best——"

"But you were right! I know it."

Mrs. Payne realised that Belle was under the sway of her emotions, and argument would be useless. She held the girl close a little longer, and when she spoke again it was to ask help in packing.

As the day wore along, the bustle and excitement of departure caused the convalescent to forget her own distress; and after the city guests drove away,

the Clarks decided that it was too late to leave that night.

When the master of Casa Grande returned next day he found his other guests ready to depart. It was the middle of the forenoon, and Wash had his wagon in the courtyard, nearly loaded with the family belongings that, little by little, had been transferred from their cabin during the months of the wounded girl's stay. Mrs. Clark rode on the wagon, and Buck, saddled and bridled, stood ready for his mistress.

The old lady was sincerely grateful for many kindnesses in the big house, where, with all her care and worry, she had never known a more restful time. There could be no doubt of her regret at leaving, yet it was equally plain that she would rejoice to be again in her own home. She had done her duty steadfastly. If sometimes she had faltered at the irksome confinement of the sick-room, nevertheless Miller recognised as hers many traits that bloomed more vigorously in her daughter.

Belle had given the last touch to the load and was watching it drive away. She was calm and

self-contained this morning, yet a different girl from the Belle who had been wounded the night of the fire, and her dress to-day expressed the change. Mrs. Payne, after all, had failed to make her more conventional; the personality was too pronounced for that. What had been done, however, was to emphasise her individualities, to strengthen the admirable traits and make them more noticeable.

Miller approvingly scanned her trim figure as she stood ready to mount, and, to his surprise, when he offered to help her, she put up her foot and permitted him to lift her to the saddle. She had on the accustomed grey sombrero, but a crimson kerchief wound about the crown gave the touch that made it feminine. She still wore a navy-blue riding shirt, but tied carelessly about her perfect throat was a scarf the colour of her hatband. She had on the same full buckskin trousers, but from the knees down they were hidden by a glossy pair of top-boots, and about her waist was a crimson sash, the tasselled ends falling over her hip. She revelled in warm colours, and yet they appeared not inappropriate.

Under the man's steadfast gaze, the tint deepened in her cheeks and a light glowed in her eyes. She sat lightly erect in her saddle, her body swaying gracefully to every motion of the horse. The time for parting had come, and with it a strange embarrassment rose between them. With downcast eyes and painfully throbbing hearts, they stood in the shadow of a nameless longing.

The girl's mount was impatient to follow the conveyance drawn by two of his fellows, that had disappeared through the gate; and, though she reined him firmly, he would not stand. Miller took him by the bit and held him quiet. The action broke the constraint.

"Wait, Buck." He spoke soothingly, and rubbed the animal's nose. "I'm not near so anxious to see you leave as you are to go. I haven't said good-bye yet to your mistress."

"Say it now, before Buck feels lost." She spoke very low, with a faint attempt to smile, and laid an ungloved hand in his.

It was a shapely hand, in spite of the toil it had done—a white hand, now, after long idleness—and

his fingers closed with a grip of ownership over the softness of it.

"I suppose the word must be said," he regretfully replied, and walked beside her through the gate. She tried feebly to withdraw her fingers, but he clung only the tighter. "It has been blessedness to have you here," he continued; "even the agony has been blessed."

She leaned lightly to him and gazed into his clear, brown eyes. Her lips were drawn to hide their quiver and her breath was short. Words came at last. "I wish I could thank you, Mr. Miller, for all you have done, but I—can't." Her voice failed, and she turned away her face, her hand still clasped by his.

"Don't try, Belle." He reassuringly pressed her fingers. "I know without telling."

"You can't know. It isn't the comforts, the nursing, the doctoring. It's the brightness and sweetness of living; something besides forever working and saving." A new motive, like a guiding star, was climbing above her horizon, and she must point it out.

"I'm very glad you found them all. Everything here seemed hard and rough, and I've regretted that I could do no more."

There was the caressing note in his voice that had thrilled her the night he learned she did not set fire to the barn; it was thrilling her now. She drew away from him, tearing her fingers from his clasp lest he should feel their trembling. What was this exquisite terror that gripped her to suffocation? She turned to him again, and something in his bearing, a mixture of supplication and command, forced her to him, and she felt a wild impulse to fling herself into his arms. A swift movement caused Buck to spring away homeward; when she brought him back, she was calm again. But she must end the interview before she betrayed herself.

"Good-bye," she said. "Don't come any farther." He had walked with her halfway up the hill. "I never can forget you. If you think the life here hard and rough, it is luxury compared to ours. If my father had been like your father, I might be like you." She gravely studied him, then dropped a

hand on his shoulder, unconscious of familiarity. "I want to be like you—like Mrs. Payne."

He reached up and clasped her hand; but she, remembering her resolution, drew away.

"That's why I want a home," she continued. "That's why it has been so hard to forgive you for taking ours. But I——"

"Belle!" he protested. "Haven't I——?"

"I must hurt you. I'll not do so again. I've wanted many times to tell you; let me go on. I have forgiven, but it took all these months! Our land must have been such a little thing to you; it was our world—eight years of our lives!"

"But remember," he said, again reaching for her hand, "you scarcely had spoken to me then."

She had forgotten that. It suddenly came to her what a difference the intimacy of the past four months had made; she realised her power to make him suffer, and it gave joy rather than pain. She leaned tenderly to him and said :

"You thought you were right; I know it now. I'm sorry if I have hurt. I've suffered, too; even death—the night I was wounded, and the time I

was paralysed. But you've been sweet and patient and helpful; Mrs. Payne herself was not so gentle; and I thank you, Mr. Miller, I thank you for showing me how strong and tender a good man can be; I forgive all." Once more she offered him her hand.

He held to her fingers while he earnestly studied her shining face. "You've left out one word, Belle—loving; strong and tender and loving. Haven't you seen that, too, dear?"

"No, no!" she gasped, trying to free her hand. "You mustn't! Please let me go."

"Why?" He spoke gently, but there was a note of command in his tone.

"Please let me go," she repeated. "No, John, don't take me in your arms; I'm very weak. If you knew how I've fought against this—I'm not worthy!"

"There, there," he soothingly said, and stepped back. "I didn't know it would be such a terrible thing—loving me, sweetheart. I hoped it would bring you joy and peace."

"No, no; I mustn't!"

"But you do." He was smiling and confident again. "I can read it in your tell-tale eyes."

She quickly turned away her face and gathered her reins. Her body swayed as if she might fall, and he apprehensively put up his hands again to catch her.

"Don't touch me," she protested, resolutely straightening in her saddle; but she brushed her hand across her eyes with the gesture of one that does not see clearly.

"Now go, dear," he said, with a pang of remorse. "I'll come to-morrow. I should have waited—after all the harm I've done you."

"What harm?" She was brightening again.

"Something that has lain heavily on my mind ever since the fire." He looked on the ground, his sombrero hiding his face.

"Well?" she lightly asked, and tried to raise his hat-brim.

"I shot you." He almost whispered the words.

She freed her hand, laid it on his shoulder, and, with a smile in her glance, answered: "I don't believe you."

His face remained averted and hidden.

"How do you know?" she quietly demanded.

"The bullet—it's too small for any other revolver." As he answered, he felt the hand resting on him tremble, then withdraw. Still he would not look at her.

She settled herself in the saddle, her heart bounding at the sudden revelation of how profound was his love. There could no longer be a doubt of his sincerity; the acuteness of his suffering for wounding her laid bare his long-restrained emotions. But a latent feminine perversity; the realisation of what he was offering her; Mrs. Payne's warning—all combined to arouse the coquetry never yet allowed full swing, which for months had been held down by a sense of wrong, of inequality, of inopportunity; and the desire to tease her lover, to make him pursue her, rose above all other impulses. She wheeled her mount, which broke away at a gallop; as she rode off, Miller glanced up, and never before had she known how swiftly a face can go haggard. She pulled hard on the lines, her quick sympathy impelling her to assure him that he misunderstood; but

the eager horse could not be held back by ordinary force, and she gave him his head. The pang her lover's suffering had caused was quickly forgotten in a new-found happiness and the conviction that he would follow her.

Miller vaguely gazed after Belle speeding over the hill, and disappearing without turning back, and he wondered how she could be so cruel. That she acted from intention he could not believe; yet he did not know what else her going implied. The elemental impulse of her sex to be pursued in love, particularly dominant in the half-wild girl, was yet a mystery to him, and he must suffer for his denseness. He stood for a while baffled by his emotions, then went unsteadily down the rise.

Across the afternoon sky a rain-cloud was flinging black shadows, and the freshening wind whistled in short gusts.



CHAPTER XXIV.

TELL ME

SOON after the breaking up at Casa Grande, Bailey met Wash in Santa Rosa and learned that Belle was miserable. Her brother did not know the trouble, but the symptoms most clearly impressed on him were sleeplessness, indifference to meals, and long stretches of silence and solitary wandering; the family was greatly worried lest she should be ill again.

On Sunday following, the sheriff went to Casa Grande. He had brooded over Belle's condition, and had decided that Miller was responsible for her unhappiness. The only conclusion he could accept was that the master of Aguas Frias had won the girl's love and had failed to respond. Of course, it was unintentional; and yet, during her convalescence, Miller must have been somewhat diverted by her growing affection, and, when he found that it might

be his for the taking, had tired of it, and cast it from his regard as he would any novel sensation after it no longer amused him.

Miller should be admonished for his treatment of Belle, should have his attention called to the suffering he was causing her. The master of the range was too generous to persist in any action that wounded another, and a word would be sufficient to end his attentions—would probably induce him to avoid her in future. No one was better qualified for this duty than the sheriff, who had set out eagerly and without resentment, although not quite conscious of the self-interest underlying his other motives. As he rode into the courtyard, the vaqueros were leaving, and Miller was comfortably stretched in the shade, reading.

"Put up your horse, Bailey," was the ranchero's cordial greeting.

"No; I shan't stay long," the rider answered, as he dismounted and walked over to Miller.

"Nothing wrong, I trust," genially remarked the host.

Bailey replied that nothing was intentionally

wrong; yet he would like to talk about Belle and her condition. The visitor showed no embarrassment in thus broaching the object of his call.

"Sit down," said Miller, making room beside himself on the settee. "You've come to the right place, old man. Fire away."

The ranchero's manner expressed no suspicion of his guest's purpose, and the sheriff felt cordiality in tone and act. The reception made him hesitate, and he began more indirectly than he had intended.

"Have you seen Belle lately?" he asked.

"No," Miller answered; "not since the lady left here."

"Why not?" Bailey rather sharply demanded.

"It's only a week or ten days."

"They're afraid she's going to be sick again. Do you think you've treated her square?"

"When did you see her?" asked Miller, ignoring the last question.

"Wash told me."

"I tried to keep them longer; I was afraid Belle was hardly strong enough for outdoor life."

Bailey closely scrutinised his host; the man was

too evasive to suit the sheriff, who came in a mood for finding fault. "Do you think her wound is the trouble?"

"What did Wash say?"

"Wash is a boy," somewhat contemptuously observed Bailey. "He don't know."

"Do you?"

"I can guess—and you ought to," sourly answered Bailey.

"No, Sam, I can't. If you know what will help her, tell me."

"There's no use beating round the bush," impatiently declared the sheriff. "You haven't been treating her right; I was afraid of it when I saw how she was growing to feel toward you. Don't you know you're making her suffer?"

Miller shook his head. He knew she had made him suffer, and it would not lessen his misery to learn that she, too, suffered, if for the same cause. He quietly answered: "No, Sam; I am unconscious of having done anything to distress her."

"There's the trouble. You're unconscious of it. It means nothing to you, but everything to her."

"How do you know?"

"Know! Can't I see? I've warned you before, and I was right. Now you've done it."

Miller, in the light of recent experiences, could not help feeling amused. "What would you have me do?" he asked.

"You know best. You've knocked about more than I."

"Then why question my motives?"

"Because you've treated the girl as an equal, without feeling that she is."

Miller quietly laughed; a sudden apprehension impelled him to ask: "Does Belle know of the protest you are entering?"

"No; I'm acting on my own judgment. She's had no experience. I love her, and you've made her unhappy. That's reason enough!"

"Yes, Bailey. But, remember, a girl like Belle always can protect herself from a man like me."

"Evidently she hasn't," remarked the sheriff, lying back indolently. "You must admit that I have some cause to protest, as you call it."

"You are not protesting, but interfering," drily replied Miller.

Bailey looked up in surprise, and did not immediately answer. "I didn't intend to interfere. I can't drive you. I just want to explain—to let you know how my heart aches for her."

Miller did not reply.

"I'd stand aside in a minute," Bailey continued, "if I thought you would marry her and make her happy."

"It seems to me, Bailey, not quite fair to Belle, this discussing of what we would or could do with her." Miller spoke abruptly.

"It seems to me," answered Bailey, quite at ease, "that this is just the time for discussion."

"Do you think gentlemen should discuss a woman's confidence?"

"No, no," quickly responded Bailey. "I wouldn't think of abusing any woman's trust, and Belle's least of all. I only want to save her from pain."

"A worthy purpose; although you go about it with a touch of hysteria, I fear."

"But I have to sledge-hammer you, Miller. You won't see!"

"I trust," replied Miller, "that you'll not attempt to discipline other men the same way; it might put Belle in a questionable position."

The sheriff rose and demanded an explanation.

"What right," asked Miller, "has any man not a blood relative or an accepted lover to champion a woman's cause?"

Bailey backed up against a post supporting the porch and stood dejectedly eyeing the floor, his hands in his pockets. He soon reasoned out a justification, and said:

"It's different between you and me; you know I love her, and I know you're making her suffer."

"Yes, Sam, I understand your motive; but, just the same, our intimacy doesn't alter the right of championship."

Another reason flashed into the sheriff's mind. "I may not be a blood relative, nor an accepted lover, but I've done so much more than you for her and hers that I have a right to protect her from her own innocence."

Miller leaned comfortably back and listened.

"What have you done?" demanded the sheriff.
"You put them out of their home—refused them a
poor little hundred and sixty acres from your thou-
sands. That's one of the things you've done."

Miller uneasily changed his position.

"You put them all in jail," Bailey pursued. "Then,
when your conscience troubled you, you helped me
get bail for them."

The ranchero did not look at his accuser.

"Oh, yes. You did put up a new cabin for them.
But, after that, what happened? Tom left the coun-
ty, driven out by a fear that if he stayed he might
kill you. And Belle was shot within a hundred
yards of your door!" The sheriff's voice had
dropped to a whisper, and he stood sombrely above
the man crouching on the settee. "How do you
know," he went on, "that you didn't do it? What
proof is there that your bullet didn't lay her
out?"

The ranchero looked up helplessly and moistened
his lips with his tongue. He had done all these things,
had suffered, and had tried to atone for them. "Do

you think it fair," he asked, "to remind me of matters I gladly would forget? What good will it do?"

"This much good: It'll show you that I have a right to protest against your further wronging Belle; that I have the right to ask you to give up seeing her—keep away from her."

Miller lazily straightened himself and indulgently regarded his guest. To keep him away from Belle; that was the burden of the sheriff's purpose. It was very evident. Her champion harped on her suffering, not because she suffered, but because it furnished a reason to separate her from his rival. It was a harmless enough purpose, and the rival had listened patiently.

"Suppose," he said, at last, "that I do give her up—keep away from her?"

Bailey's face lighted. "That's all I ask, old man; just stay away. Give her time to see that she must not go out of her own class."

"You think I'm the cause of her straying?"

"I think you've put wrong ideas in her head, excited longings that can't be gratified. She comes

from plain people, whose women have been content to be mothers and homekeepers."

"If I remember correctly," remarked Miller, "you, too, came from plain people."

"Oh, yes," was the annoyed answer. "I can be plain without being an obscure drudge. I want to own a ranch and be master. Then you'll find me as simple in my home as my grandfather."

Miller leaned back and softly laughed.

"Anything wrong in my reasoning?"

"Your reasoning is the quintessence of logic," Miller answered, as he rose. "It's the purpose behind the reasoning that amuses me. You want a clear field; mind you, a clear field, not a fair field."

"No, sir, I don't. Why, I've loved her for years. I'm their tried friend. I helped bury their father, and ever since I've stood ready to do what I could for them. I saved them, as far as possible, the humiliation of being in jail. I tried to save their home for them—you know that. I'm ready to give my life for her; I've proved it," he declared, touching the arm Belle had broken.

"There's no doubt of your sincerity, Bailey. But

have you considered what you can expect in return? Would you take her unless she loves you as you love her?"

"I'll take her any way. Once my wife, she'll find me not a bad fellow."

Miller watched the goldfish sporting in the fountain, and contrasted the sheriff's ideal of loving with his own, which would give everything, yet demanded as much in return. Belle had not proved herself capable of yielding what he required, and he considered that Bailey and he were scarcely rivals.

The sheriff had reached his limit, and felt that the last word had been spoken. He walked to his horse, adjusted the blanket under the saddle, and, as he was about to mount, turned to Miller with the remark:

"You've not said if you'll keep away."

"No. Instead, I'll tell you what I should do if I were in your place. I never would give up till she sent me away."

"Good-bye." The caller bounded into his saddle.
"I'll take your advice."

Bailey did not ride away with the same feeling of

vague uneasiness that he had ridden in with. He had discovered but little of Miller's motives, yet intuition told him that the relations between Belle and the ranchero were not as intimate as they had been. When he passed out the gate, stars were twinkling and a touch of frost was in the air. At the fork of the road he cheerily turned toward Dry Creek.

CHAPTER XXV.

THAT THOU WERT AS MY BROTHER

IT was quite dark when Bailey reached the Clarks' door-yard, and Belle was not in the cabin, her mother being alone in the kitchen. The caller put up his horse and made himself at home in the room where the widow was finishing the housework. They spoke of the family life at Casa Grande, its probable effect on Belle, and the mother complained of the girl's disturbing symptoms.

Belle softly entered while they were discussing her, and before Bailey knew it she was standing near him, more a spirit than a living being; for the moment, he felt a touch of weariness in her coming. Her greeting was neither distant nor cordial; she had a quiet reserve that roused in him a sudden passion of resentment, quickly dispelled when he saw her face in the dim light of the candle. The features were far too expressive to hide the suffering that

had been torturing her soul, and his resentment gave way to pity.

He attempted the usual flow of banter, and lost no opportunity to thrust at Miller and Mrs. Payne. His efforts fell unresponsively, however, and the evening closed sombrely about them. As Belle left to prepare the guest's bed, he quietly asked her to wait after the others had retired.

A log blazed in the wide chimney, and when they were at last alone he moved two chairs before the warmth. Belle reluctantly took the seat offered; she was in no condition to undergo the coming ordeal, but felt it a duty, and silently fortified herself.

Bailey could not keep his eyes from her face. Unusual pallor and a slight wasting of the body intensified the appearance of refinement he had noticed in the sick-room, and the gentle submission of her attitude strongly affected him. He was studying quite another individual than the girl he had known, yet with enough of her old familiarity to keep him from feeling utterly estranged. The rough comradeship of yesterday was gone, and in its place

were quiet confidence, gentle seriousness, that told of a new and mysterious inner life, to be disclosed only to a kindred soul.

He rose with a movement of impatience and turned his back to the fire. That inner life of hers might be beyond him; what difference need it make? She could live it alone: all were more or less alone in this world. His insistent impression was her sweetness, and he coveted her more than ever. Whether or not his affection could satisfy the craving of her soul never entered his speculations; in his understanding, affection meant only domestic comfort and sympathy, and he felt able to supply both abundantly.

The way to approach the subject clamouring for expression disquieted him, however. Her manner reflected Miller's influence, and he wondered at the sudden change. If she were only more responsive, a little less passive, he would know how to begin.

"Your stay at the big house hasn't done you much good," he at last ventured.

She gazed absently into the blaze, and dreamed of

the other fireplace that had been hers many months —of the other voice that sounded ever in her memory, soothing, caressing, thrilling. She was too far away to reply.

"I've just come from Casa Grande," he continued. "We were talking of you. It's no use, Belle; you're not suited to him."

A dangerous gleam came into her eyes, unobserved, however, by the visitor.

"I told him he had no right to fool you the way he had been; that he was making you unhappy——"

"How dare you, Sam Bailey!" she cried, springing up; "how dare you!" The quiver of her voice and the tumult of her breast showed how keenly he had offended.

"He surely don't care, Belle. He looks on you-all as so much white trash, to be kicked out when he tires of you."

The expression on her face turned to amusement, and she sat down.

"That's what I told him," continued Bailey, "and he couldn't deny it. He said he hadn't been to see you since you left there."

"I thought you knew, Sam," she quietly replied, "that he never has been to see us but once." Her expression was not the least resentful.

"He'll never marry you. You're not his kind. Mrs. Payne is; there's a big difference."

The expression of her face was still unchanged.

"If he ever asks you to have him, look out; he'll never make you his wife."

Her breast went suddenly to heaving again, and he noted her distress with pleasure. She was Miller all over; if she would not talk, her guest would find a way to make her show feeling.

"All he wants is to get you in his arms—then see!"

He was blundering shamelessly, so dense as not to realise that her trust in the man he had been trouncing was too sincere to consider any defence of him necessary. She quietly rose, took a candle from the mantel and prepared to light it.

"Wait, Belle," he said, coaxingly; "I'll say no more against Miller. You've made a god of him, and he can't do wrong. You'll have heartache and trouble, though, as long as you love out of your

class. Take me," he impetuously pleaded. "You know how——"

"Please don't!" The swift change from Miller to himself had startled her, and she stood with her hand pressed to her throat and eyes pleading for her.

But he had waited long, and his own desire submerged all other emotion. "You must love me; you will as soon as you get him out of your thoughts. We were happy before he came—we'll be happy again. Think how long I've waited—all I've done."

"I have, Sam. I really have tried." She looked away from him, and added: "You're like a brother, and I love you the way I love Tom and Wash."

"I know, Belle; you've loved me that way a long time. You'll learn to love me better when we're married; that's your style. You can trust me—it has been ever since your father died. You were a little girl with dresses to your knees—I've been your friend through thick and thin."

She grasped the high mantel shelf, leaned her head on her upraised arm, and dreamily gazed into the fire.

"There never has been any other woman, honey—

your image always. Ever since I was first made deputy sheriff have I been shaping things to marry you. I bought a big ranch the other day. It's for you."

She looked at him, pain and distress on her face. The hollows under her eyes were deepening and her voice had grown thin. "I've tried for months to let you see." Her lips trembled in an effort at self-control. "I haven't deceived you."

Her evident distress, her physical weakening, were signs of yielding, to his imagination; and he went on, regardless of the anguish he was causing, unconscious of his brutality: "I've worked and saved for that ranch many years. I know you'll like it."

Her thoughts were getting confused, and his voice sounded far off. She turned away her head again.

"I tried to save your home for you when he put you off; tried to save you." Her cheek was resting against her arm as she leaned on the mantel, and she did not move. He gently laid a hand on her. "The scar on this arm I'll take to my grave. It was for your sake, sweetheart."

"Oh, Sam, please!" The cry came from the depths of her womanhood as she faced him. She was trembling as if from a chill, and her cheeks were ashen. She kept her hand on the shelf to steady herself.

"You must love me, Belle—you will," he went on, desperately. "Say you'll be my wife. Trust me. You'll learn to love me as well as you think you love him."

She slowly shook her head, her eyes cast down, chained where she was by a feeling that she must fall if she stirred.

"I can't let you go, honey; I won't. I'll be your lifelong slave; he'll be your master, whatever you are to him. Try me. Trust me, little girl—my only love."

He held out his arms; she looked at them outstretched to her—at him. Something was obscuring her vision, and she slowly brushed her fingers across the lids. She groped for the mantel and swayed toward him; he caught her before she fell—she had swooned.

He was alarmed at what he had done, and quickly had Mrs. Clark working over her. The girl soon

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revived, and when she again became conscious she flung her arms about her mother and burst into a passion of tears.

He stood humbly by, waiting for her to speak. She turned, at last, her emotion controlled, and held out her hand. On her face was a light that made him think of angels.

"I want you to be my dear brother," she said.

He caught her fingers with a grip of despair and smothered them in both his trembling palms, then bent and tenderly kissed them. "Forgive me, Belle. I see now. I'm too rough. You wouldn't be happy with me. He called you a thoroughbred. You're fit for a king!—and Miller is a prince."

He turned and took down his hat and cloak.

"You mustn't go," protested Mrs. Clark, hastening toward him.

"Yes; I must." He stopped to gaze at Belle, now reclining in an easy-chair. "You're the first woman I ever loved. I'll never find one so sweet. Good-bye."

When his step no longer sounded in the yard, Mrs. Clark closed the outer door, walked over and laid

her hand caressingly on Belle's hair. The older woman had no words to express sympathy; her life had been too repressed. But an impulse long moving found expression, at last, in this tender act.

The girl reached gratefully up and clasped the thin, worn fingers. "I tried, mother. But I couldn't!"

Her mother knelt beside her and drew the troubled face down on her breast.



CHAPTER XXVI

WHEN I SHOULD FIND THEE

BELLE'S interview with Bailey, although distressing, proved a balm, for it awakened her to the selfishness of her own grieving. She had caused suffering to a well-loved friend, and the thought of his pain, of the hopeless days that must follow her refusal, took her fancy from her own misery by enlisting her sympathy for his.

As she lay in bed late the morning after the sheriff's departure her mind went back over the swift changes a few months had wrought. Two suitors had asked for her love, both tried and manly fellows. Her throat filled with pride at the memory, even though both had failed her, for it was a comfort to know that she had been prized.

The refusal of Bailey seemed inevitable. He might have been her intellectual superior until within the

year, but she was rapidly outgrowing his horizon, and she more and more felt how lonely companionship with him would be. The animal stage of her existence was passing forever and her soul clamoured for expression; the animal stage of his existence never would pass. It had been hard to say no, but the wisdom of the decision she could not question.

The misunderstanding with Miller, however, was a problem quite beyond her penetration. His neglect to follow up the opportunity she had tried to make plain very nearly unseated her reason the first week after their parting. Had the truth not come to her through the slow delay of unfulfilled days, had she realised at the hour how utterly he would fail her, the will-power that previous months of suffering had weakened must have given way under the strain of his desertion. But after days of such anguish as only ardent youth can feel, exhausted endurance left an apathy that served as an anodyne to her tortured fancy, and gave her courage to stiffen again under the burden that threatened to crush her down.

With returning tranquillity came renewed activity

of her receptive mind; once more reason grew dominant over feeling, and womanhood asserted itself. As she gradually recognised her own emotions—her passion of loving, her craving to be loved—a doubt arose of Miller's worthiness; the man her fancy had garbed with the perfections, the impulses, of a god took on the shape of common clay, with all its native pettiness. Only two alternatives seemed possible: he must be stupid or insincere; and whether the one or the other, he was unworthy of confidence. The conclusion did not yield her consolation, but it changed the early humiliation of having failed Miller to a growing contempt for his having failed her.

At the end of the second month the law of blessed compensations, which exhausts a love that finds no equal love to feed upon, had already begun to heal Belle's hurt, and bitterness and disappointment were giving way to regret. Her memory persisted in recalling that last aggrieved glance of Miller's when they parted, as if he had measured her emotion by his own and found hers wanting. She resented the disappointment in his look, and all it implied, as she

resented his heartlessness in neglecting her; nevertheless, she continued to grieve because she had failed him.

As the days wore on, she found that life could go forward again, that her strength was responding to the burden she bore, and peace came slowly back into her heart; once more the sun shone, birds sang, and the perfume of spring was in the air. It was not quite the same as former springs—the joyous abandon of living had sobered—but in its place were memories and dreams that never before had come. Tireless activity no longer was necessary—a deeper attraction hiding in wooded solitudes where something within her welled up in divine thankfulness just for existence itself.

She soon took up, quite cheerfully, the round of daily cares, and now and again her mother caught the low notes of some old song, which she heard with swelling throat and misty vision. Colour came back to the girl's cheeks and her step regained its accustomed swing; but the alertness in her eyes had given way to the changeful depths of mountain pools, awaiting an image to be mirrored in them.

And all the while Wash noted alterations in her dress. Her costumes had always pleased the younger brother's sense of fitness, merely because they had appeared part of her swing and dash. They had been not entirely mannish—rather, wild and striking; gradually, however, they were taking on an air of femininity and softness that sometimes embarrassed the boy.

He called attention to the change one morning at table. "Maw," he said, "we've got a lady in the family."

But when the lady caught him in her arms, something awoke, perhaps the feminine instinct latent in all men; and never again did he mention the subject.

This change in her raiment was not on Miller's account, however. Why should it be? She never saw him now, except at a distance; he did not come her way, and she was too feminine to go his way. She was changing the style of her clothing as she was changing other things—because it seemed fit and proper and gave her pleasure. And it must have been her own sense of fitness, since she avoided all men.

Belle, as her spirits revived, turned her glances more frequently in the direction of Casa Grande. She was certain that Miller avoided Dry Creek, although she had left him no excuse to stay away. And yet, never a horseman passed from the direction of the old fort that she did not start and watch.

She took to climbing the range that overlooked the valley of Aguas Frias to scan the velvet carpet of the hills set with budding oak and flowering buckeye. She never sought for Miller; it was not his form that led her to that vantage point, even though she could readily distinguish him far away, as he rode to his daily tasks; but her wandering usually ended with a glimpse of him.

As the days lengthened and the air grew warm, she went more frequently to the brow of the hill. She passed even beyond, well in the cover of trees, ever nearer to the old house, developed the craft of an Indian in hiding, and found wild delight in approaching Miller's haunts without being seen.

They met at last, face to face; riding on a narrow trail. He leaped from his saddle and held his horse on a steep bench while she passed.

"Aren't you going to speak, John?" she asked.

He left his mount behind hers, went to her side, and clasped her warm, firm hand with the grip of proprietorship which had thrilled her before. She would not yield to mere claiming, although she might to force, and she quickly drew away her fingers and averted her face.

"No," he smilingly answered; "not yet." He still failed to understand how she differed from the women of his class, who bestowed love as a gift, without any need of compulsion.

"When?" She spoke so low it was almost a sigh, and dropped her hand beside her, close enough to him to feel his breath on her fingers.

He clasped them again and looked up; her face was still turned away. He pressed the fingers to his lips, and lightly answered: "When you send for me."

As before, she abruptly rode off; out at a turn in the trail she looked back happily, blew a kiss to him, and disappeared.

He stood a long time where she left him and sombrely gazed in the direction she had vanished. He

must not follow—not yet. It was a trying ordeal, this waiting for her to recognise her own emotion. She either loved him so much, or hated him so intensely, that she could not be merely civil; and the slightest mistake on his part would drive her from him, perhaps beyond recovery.

He went back to his daily routine, this time sustained and comforted by the knowledge that she was hovering always near, like a mother-bird flitting about her nest—the shy advancing, the swift retreating; and all the while he must not, by glance or motion, let her know that he was aware of her presence.

It came at last to be a matter of every-day occurrence thus evasively to meet each other. Even Gyp understood what led her master to certain parts of his range, and the dog now took part in the by-play between maiden and man.

Belle must suddenly have become conscious that she was observed by Miller when the dog came into the action, for the girl disappeared from the range and her daily visits ceased.

Miller wandered alertly over the parts of his ranch

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that she had been in the habit of visiting, but with never a glimpse of her. He soon became satisfied that she was now observing him, and he found himself the seeker, instead of the one sought. It pleased him to learn how intensely feminine she was and how persistently she refused to surrender. Then he, too, ceased his visits to that part of the range near Dry Creek.

The month of June was at hand, and everything in heaven above, and the earth beneath, and even the waters under the earth, was clamorous of love and conspiring with the lover. One night, as Miller was about to retire, wearied after a hard day's riding, he thought he heard the swish of moccasined feet on the porch. The night was dark; Gyp was with Manuel, and his own vision could detect nothing but the shadowy underbrush. He whistled for the dog, and when she responded, there was no doubt who had made the noise on the porch. It was half an hour before Gyp returned, and she gave every sign of happiness, leaped on her master, whined, and tried to let him know where she had been. She succeeded quite well.

The ranchero now changed the time of his wandering. He discovered that the girl was coming after dark, and she might easily approach close to the house without being molested by the dogs, every one of them knowing and loving her. He had an advantage in always taking Gyp along, for what her eyes could not see or her ears hear her keen scent could detect.

So the girl was forced from the range once again. Once again, however, she was equal to his vigilance, for her tracks betrayed her. Miller knew that she was still coming to the old house, although he beat the range nightly till after midnight, without finding her. Then it occurred to him to try the early morning.

He came upon her at last, and only the girl's alertness saved her. It was a little before dawn, and Gyp, just ahead of him, barked sharply but joyously. He went swiftly to the spot, but dog and girl had fled; and, although he followed, he failed to overtake them.

The sun was peeping over the eastern hills when Gyp came back to him. About her throat was tied



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Belle's crimson ribbon. He had caught the flash of it on her hair that morning, in the dim light, and stood looking happily at his loved one's message. There could be no mistaking the signals: she had struck her colours, and he now might go and claim the citadel of her heart.

He stooped to take the ribbon from Gyp's neck, but she deftly avoided him and barked joyfully. When he went toward her, she leaped and bounded in the direction she had left Belle, as if to coax her master to follow. He surmised her object, and shook his head.

"Not yet, old lady," he said. "Let us wait an hour or two."

The day was Sunday, just a year since he had carried the bunch of azaleas to Belle. He would keep the anniversary by taking her another bunch, and went to the glen to gather them. The sun was hot; birds vied with one another in making melody; the noise of insects was clamorous, and over it all was the sleepy murmur of Aguas Frias, not quite run dry.

As the man rounded a bluff in the trail, he looked

down on the thicket of creamy white blossoms not twenty feet away, and in the midst of it was Belle. Something in her appearance caught at his throat and fetched his breath in gasps.

The sounds of nature's rejoicing had prevented her from hearing his approach, and she kept on filling her arms with the flowers, the same purpose in her mind as in her lover's. Instinct told her that he would come to-day, and she planned to surprise him.

A wide-brimmed straw hat lay on the ground, and she had replaced the customary blue waist with white. Her hair was caught back and fell in a half-dozen glossy ringlets to her shoulders, and her shining face mirrored heaven.

A motion of his caused her to look up. She slowly straightened and her lips parted. The mass of blossoms slid from her relaxing clasp and clung to her garments—twined themselves in the curves of her supple body on their way to the earth.

"John!" she cried, and held out her hands.

With a bound, as might an elemental man, he had her in his arms. The babble of flowing water hushed.

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The music of bird-notes ceased. The shrilling of insects stilled. The shadows in the glen were glorified. And life and love and ecstasy closed about them in divine silence.

THE END





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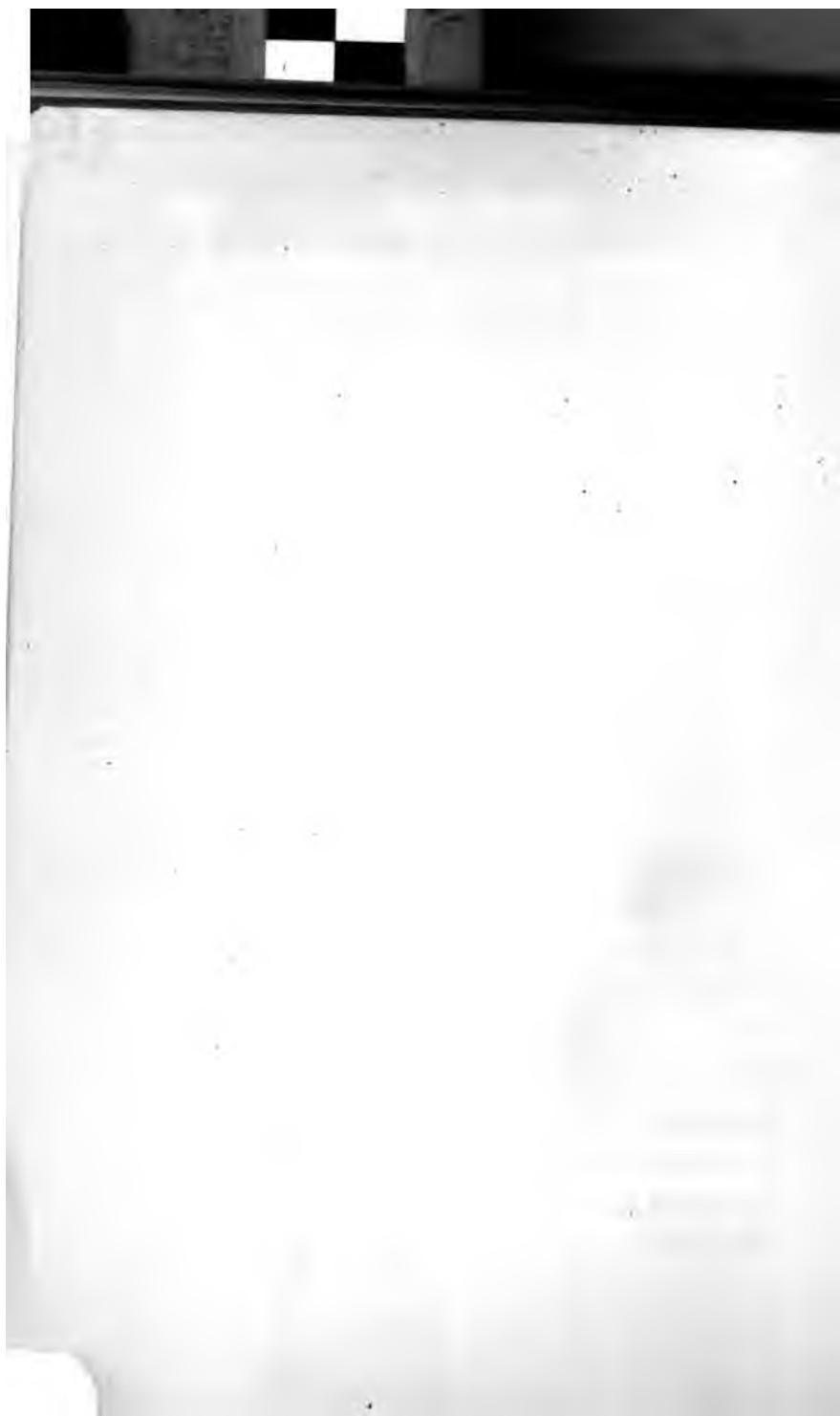
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